

The Treatment of  
Moral Values in the Work of  
Four Contemporary  
Novelists: Graham Greene;  
Muriel Spark; Iris Murdoch;  
Doris Lessing

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Patricia Joan Ann Stubbs

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to examine the treatment of moral values in the work of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing.

Chapter One provides a context for subsequent work; and considers some possible stances to the treatment of moral values in fiction; that is, it suggests they can be reflected, reinforced, questioned or rephrased. It reflects, too, on some aspects of contemporary society and thought which relate to the overall topic.

Graham Greene's treatment of moral values is examined in Chapter Two. Novels like Brighton Rock reveal that a tension exists between the moral and the spiritual; and it is argued that he often questions the finality of moral judgements.

In Chapter Three, Muriel Spark's approach to moral values is aligned with his; for she too envisages man's soul as of paramount importance. Her satirical bent, however, ensures that much of her fiction is devoted to the portrayal of man's lack of moral values.

The consideration of Iris Murdoch in Chapter Four argues that she tests out many of her philosophical hypotheses within her fiction. Her sympathetic but speculative examina-

tion of the difficulties inherent in the moral life is compared to George Eliot's; though the former's attempt to rehabilitate Christian concepts is seen as radical.

Chapter Five traces the evolution of Doris Lessing's fiction from her criticism of African society to her embodiment of a mystical view of life. Moral values are crucial to the Martha Quest novels, where she endeavours to substitute new notions of the moral for conventional views. Later, her Sufi belief largely causes the ethical to disappear.

The Conclusion suggests that though these novelists often treat moral values speculatively, this response springs from an intelligent appraisal of the contemporary world. All stress the need for the individual to be self-responsible; and their clear-sighted treatment of moral issues aids such a process.

CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
1. Introduction . . . . .	5
2. Chapter One: Some Prior Considerations	9
3. Chapter Two: Graham Greene . . . . .	56
4. Chapter Three: Muriel Spark . . . . .	161
5. Chapter Four: Iris Murdoch . . . . .	237
6. Chapter Five: Doris Lessing . . . . .	383
7. Conclusion . . . . .	513
8. Bibliography . . . . .	528



## INTRODUCTION

This thesis sprang from a deep and puzzled interest in the treatment of moral values in contemporary fiction and a desire to see whether novelists are currently still concerned to portray and examine moral issues in ways which can be compared to the practice of novelists of the past. Whether one subscribes to F. R. Leavis' view of "the great tradition" of English fiction or not, the bias of the English novel towards the treatment of moral values, both social and personal, is noteworthy; and its excellence, flexibility and sensitivity in this field is marked. Indeed it could be argued that the attempt to portray moral values, whether questioningly, satirically, or with approval, has often released the deepest potential of some of our greatest novelists. Whereas my suspicion was that for the contemporary novelist the deliberate enactment of moral values, whatever their embodiment, frequently provided acute and pressing fictional problems. My own experience as a reader also encouraged me to see this aspect of contemporary fiction as peculiarly absorbing and elusive. The thoughtful but authoritative note of a George Eliot was absent; and I wanted to know why.

Simultaneously, the contemporary artist's attitude to the treatment of moral values in his fiction is clearly a sensitive and important area for his public and himself.

If he adopts the notion of art as play, as existing in and for itself, by implication, his treatment of traditional moral values is likely to be cursory, or critical, or even subversive. If art is its own religion, issues of conduct and traditional ethical concepts will probably enjoy a low priority. Yet, as Martin Seymour-Smith has suggested, such a viewpoint is frequently maintained only with anxiety. He comments that writers like Thomas Mann experience "artist-guilt" through the fear that their work may serve no useful function.<sup>1</sup> It is as if Plato's strictures on the relationship between poetry and morality still determine the dimensions of the debate on the function of literature, and have indeed become especially cogent in an age which feels itself to be running out of time and answers. Such a writer anticipates, and often experiences, hostility to his "immorality", or his remoteness from ordinary human affairs; his public is often resentful and puzzled.

But the situation of the writer who accepts and even welcomes the portrayal of moral values in his fiction, whether to achieve ends external to that work, or because he believes they in fact reflect a significant aspect of man's humanity, is scarcely happier. Doris Lessing, for example, initially saw her fiction as a tool of specific social change; and portrayed black/white relationships in

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1 Martin Seymour-Smith, Guide to Modern World Literature, 1975, vol.I, p. xviii.

order to criticize an immoral social system. She has been unable to maintain such an intention, however, partly as a result of her darkening view of man's nature and history and partly, surely, as a consequence of the hostility and intransigence of many of her readers. Saul Bellow's more abstract view of his fiction as intrinsically "extra" to life, but that "without which life has no being"<sup>1</sup> is held with comparable integrity and commitment, but somewhat in the manner of a general defending a bitterly beleaguered garrison. It is as if the contemporary novelist frequently finds himself in the position of Wallace Stevens' man with the blue guitar, who is asked to play for his public "a tune beyond us yet ourselves", to make possible an impossibility.

The treatment of moral values in contemporary fiction thus seemed and seems to me to be an absorbing and important area of study in itself. In addition, I believe it enables one to reflect usefully on the nature, status and function of fiction, and helps to explicate some otherwise most difficult aspects of the contemporary novel.

In order to break down such a large and difficult topic, four contrasted novelists have been selected. Two,

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1 Saul Bellow, "Myself and the Contemporary Novel", an as yet unpublished talk given to the Society for Teachers of English at Culham College, Oxford on April the 16th, 1977.



Graham Greene and Muriel Spark, are Roman Catholics; Iris Murdoch could perhaps best be termed a liberal humanist with a strong leaning towards the Christian ethic. She is also, of course, a moral philosopher of repute. Doris Lessing begins as a committed Marxist, but in her later work is influenced by Sufism. It is thus likely that the treatment of moral values within their work will be divergent, especially since they adopt differing stances to the rôle of fiction. Initially, however, Chapter One looks at the broader perspective of the novelist's treatment of moral values; and attempts to provide something of a context for the detailed work on the novelists which follows.

CHAPTER ONE

SOME PRIOR CONSIDERATIONS

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I see this chapter as an attempt to provide a framework for the examination of the treatment of moral values in the work of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing.

The title of this thesis implies an interest in the handling of moral values in fiction. Not only is it concerned to examine the embodiment, or non embodiment, of moral values in the work of the four contemporary novelists under discussion; but it also attempts to explicate the purpose or attitude behind such a presentation. Hence I begin with a definition of the term "moral values"; and suggest what I take to be the traditional meaning of this phrase. I then move on to discuss how, that is with what materials, fiction has habitually treated morality. Next I consider several possible models which the novelist may employ in treating values in fiction. Here reference will be made to the practice of previous writers of fiction; and some of the implications and difficulties attendant on these models will be drawn out.

I shall suggest where I envisage Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing as resting in relation to these models, since it is hoped this will

illuminate the novelists' attitudes to the representation of moral values in their fiction. The chapter continues by establishing some notion of the multiplicity and divergency of contemporary views of man, existence and values. Some of the fictional consequences of these will also be described. Finally, I shall attempt to relate the individual novelists under examination to this broader conceptual frame; that is, I shall elicit some aspects of their approach to life and morality which are relevant to their fiction.

It is helpful to begin with a simple definition of the term "moral values", and to consider what the phrase "the treatment of moral values" is usually taken to mean in the field of the novel. Moral values are qualities or attributes connected with ethical distinctions; and "the treatment of moral values" could be paraphrased as the handling of qualities or attributes related to ethics, that is the making of distinctions between such concepts as right and wrong, good and bad, honourable and dishonourable, just and unjust. Since fiction habitually deals, in some form, with the representation of character, and the relationship of the individual to time, space, objects and other individuals, the treatment of moral values has frequently been by means of the portrayal of concrete human situations where choice, or ethical discriminations, or problems of conduct are directly handled or dramatized in a way reminiscent of ordinary experience. So that any discussion of,



for example, Jane Austen's treatment of moral values would be likely to concentrate on an examination of particular characters and their response to situations which their creator sees as making demands on their moral natures. We consider Emma's "arrogance", or the superficiality of Mr. Elton's affections very much as we might their equivalents in life, but with the important distinction that a selective and shaping vision has focussed our attention for us and will, indeed, help to determine our reflections on the matter.

Fiction can also handle or raise moral issues or qualities by means of its use of symbols; and here it is especially reminiscent of poetry. Objects, or more often characters, can stand either for particular values, or for an attitude or code. Jane Austen, for example, uses houses and gardens within her novel, Mansfield Park to focus on some aspects of her treatment of conflicting values. Mr. Rushworth's estate is ripe, to Henry Crawford's eye, for "improvement"; but Fanny Price much regrets such a project, since she values its aura of tradition and stability and thus the notions of order and correctness which it enshrines. Iris Murdoch's use of the symbol of the bell in The Bell and her constant employment of art objects is comparable. They often provide her with a vivid means of encapsulating her larger concern with values. To this aspect I shall return in the chapter on her.

Symbolic characters are also a most familiar means of treating moral values in fiction. Fielding, inspired by earlier literary traditions, creates characters whose names reveal their close connection with ethics. Dickens writes Martin Chuzzlewit to satirize selfishness; and many characters within that novel are conceived as representative of vices or virtues in a way reminiscent of a mediaeval morality play. They are, however, much more than that; for his rich and multiform vision, coupled with the expansive form of fiction, fleshes out such abstractions with detail and interest. Similarly, when a writer like Graham Greene conceives characters like Ida in Brighton Rock, or the lieutenant in The Power and the Glory as in some way representative of ordinary secular views of morality, he does not then leave them on that dry plane of existence. They are rendered with immediacy and a compulsive psychological insight; and can thus be seen as a most effective means of raising large issues within the pragmatic form of realistic fiction.

Additionally, however, fiction can handle morality in a more abstract fashion; and though the grit of specific situations where characters, whether symbolic or not, grapple with choices and issues is perhaps the means we recognize as characteristic, its expansive prose form allows it, if the novelist so desires, to debate moral issues per se. Here

the linking commentary of the author combines with the first means by which the novelist treats values, that is, by means of character and situation, and may join with the second, the use of symbols just instanced. George Eliot is a novelist who makes extensive use of prose commentary; and in a novel like Middlemarch, her concern to examine moral values moves in the direction of philosophy, in the sense that the work allows her to test pragmatically intellectual concepts such as idealism, duty, or vocation. That novel can be seen as a most fruitful interplay between abstract precept and specific example, between concrete character and situation which flesh out and corroborate the accuracy of a larger view. Her reflective linking passages of discursive prose encourage her reader to reflect at leisure on the moral issues and qualities the book throws up: his attitude is simultaneously one of detachment and involvement. Her treatment of moral values thus becomes more analytical than that of a writer like Jane Austen.

This detachment, the desire to use the novel to explore, in some way, the nature and efficacy of a religious or moral viewpoint I have termed less familiar in fiction, yet it forms a strong and significant strand in the history of the novel. Any consideration of Iris Murdoch's and Doris Lessing's treatment of moral values needs to take cognisance of such a stance; for the former uses much of her fiction



to test out some of the hypotheses of her work as a moral philosopher, while the latter attempts, fictionally, to rephrase what we understand by such terms as "moral", "values" and "morality".

I turn now to consider some possible models which the novelist may employ in handling moral values. Previously, I have looked at his materials as it were. Now I'd like to consider his stance or mode of approach. Broadly I shall suggest that moral values can be reflected, reinforced, questioned, or rephrased in fiction; but I emphasize initially that these are categories created for the purpose of analysis. There is a degree of overlap between them all, and no novelist, particularly no good novelist, will, as it were, perform only one function. Even if his intention is, for example, to attack a specific social abuse, to expose a particular wrong, he is unlikely to write merely as a critic of current social or individual moral values. The expansive form of the novel, the novelist's necessary attention to what people are and how they behave tend to preclude such a simple-minded approach. These models, or approaches toward the treatment of moral values in fiction are a mode of entry to a most difficult subject; they are not categories into which I intend to neatly slot previous novelists or the contemporary writers under discussion.

I stated in the previous paragraph that moral values can be reflected, reinforced, questioned, or rephrased in fiction; and propose to look at these possibilities in that order.

First, study of the novel discloses that the novelist can handle moral values as a recorder or reflector of human situations, where ethical issues or qualities are often an important topic, but not necessarily the pressing concern of the novelist. Such a novelist, who will probably be writing realistic fiction, perhaps sees his function, whether consciously or unconsciously, as the notation of manners, the exact mapping of how people interact in society, the portrayal of human relationships both local and far-reaching. Thus he will reflect values, issues of conduct, moral dilemmas because it is almost impossible to reflect human existence without so doing; but his emphasis and interests really lie elsewhere. Trollope, in a novel like Barchester Towers, seems to me to provide an example of such a novelist.

It is indeed true that moral values are extensively treated in that novel, whether through situations like the rivalry between the new bishop and the Grantly faction, or via the elastic notions entertained of responsibility by the Stanhope family, or by means of the involvement of

Mr. Slope with the Lamia-like Madeline. It is also possible to detect, in some cases, the novelist's sympathy with certain moral or amoral viewpoints; his own standards are often overtly or obliquely exercised upon certain characters. But I should want to argue that this is not the central concern of the novelist, rather it is a facet only of the total picture and world he wishes to create.

Moral values are, as it were, inert for Trollope in this book, or dynamic only when they intersect with his comic purpose, which indeed it must be allowed they frequently do. Thus his situations, which so richly and neatly disclose the gap between Christian calling and actual behaviour, the dichotomy between the religion of love which most of the characters serve and their angry warfare, are exploited less for moral than for comic purposes. The reader values the accurate and lively observation of men and manners; he is not impelled to satiric or ethical reflections. Even in his first novel, The Warden, where a considerable amount of space is devoted to Mr. Harding's anxious reflections on his right to the wardenship, Trollope's accent is less moral than personal and social. The reader is involved in Mr. Harding's dilemma mostly through sympathetic exposure to his character. He is persuaded to Trollope's view that perhaps his



protagonist has not the fullest right to such a substantial sum of money; but sees, when this is presented with all his author's easy-going rationality, that a redistribution of the charity's income is unlikely to benefit those for whom it was intended.

Yet he does not experience that sharp sense of being exposed to a moral problem which he meets so frequently in the work of George Eliot, for example; his moral nerves do not thrill so acutely. Rather he sees this issue as symptomatic of much human experience, and values the novel for its tender and truthful delineation of existence.

Trollope, in these two instances, provides an example of the novelist as reflector of moral values, and this facet of his work is subsumed within his larger comic purpose. He thus, in these works cuts less deep than, for example, the George Eliot of Middlemarch. But it is important to state that the novelist who reflects moral values is not inevitably less serious or worthy of attention than those whose work may fall within the other suggested categories. To a large extent, the Tolstoy of Anna Karenina acts as a reflector of moral values, though the reasons for this are quite distinct from those which govern the case of Trollope. It would be absurd, however, to esteem any fictional criticism of misplaced values, for example, as automatically more "serious" than this novel. The inclusiveness and openness of Tolstoy's vision and the fictional skill which enshrines



it, demand of the reader the fullest and deepest attention. It is a profoundly serious novel in its attentiveness and reverence to life; and while, perhaps, it may not set out primarily to canvass moral issues, its complex presentation of character and motivation can encourage the reader to the most thoughtful reflections on such matters.

Before I go on to consider the model of the novelist as reinforcer of moral values, it will be helpful to make a brief initial statement on the relationship between the work of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing and the model examined above. To a degree, I think it is almost inevitable that the realistic novelist, qua novelist, will reflect, in some form, moral values in fiction. He reflects or portrays human behaviour and renders some sense of the actuality of existence. Within this framework, moral issues or choices, whether supported by religious, ethical or political viewpoints or not, are likely to be thrown up. The Marxist acts according to his beliefs, the Christian attempts to follow the tenets of the Church, the humanist forges his values out of a respect for his fellow men. Indeed, a world which is totally devoid of ethical distinctions, of whatever sort and whatever their rationale, is extremely difficult to envisage; and as these four novelists all, in varying degrees, represent worlds which the reader recognizes as intersecting significantly with actuality, they inevitably reflect moral values.

However, while one might argue that these four contemporary novelists, qua novelists, do reflect moral values, I suggest that their moral accent is a little firmer than that statement would imply. Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing can more helpfully be seen in relation to subsequent categories, though an aspect of the work of Muriel Spark requires further examination in relation to this first model.

In her late novels, like Trollope, she is much concerned with the delineation of manners. Her purpose is also often comic. But the important distinction must be made that she presents a world where moral values and distinctions, as such, are largely absent. Contemporary Italy, or New York, or the playgrounds of the "beautiful people", as she describes them, are a kind of looking-glass world reflection of Trollope's universe. Eleanor Bold, with all her nice scruples about re-marriage, has been supplanted by Maggie of The Takeover, whose loyalty is to pleasure, profit and power rather than to any more ideal authority. Her creator casts an implacable eye upon her; and in the chapter on Muriel Spark, I shall both investigate the amorality of the world she portrays, and attempt to explicate her apparently neutral approach to it.

I stated next that a novelist may handle moral values in his fiction in such a way as to reinforce or inculcate

them. He thus would act as a mentor; and could be termed didactic, since his intention would be to promulgate either specific views, or, more generally, to promote attitudes. This can be seen as one side of the coin of which an aspect of the third model, the questioning of values, is the reverse; and in both cases, the vexed question of intention emerges. Lawrence's comment, "Never trust the artist, ~~Trust~~ trust the tale", underlines the paradoxical situation of many intentionally "moral" works, which subvert their original aim. The plurality and scope of fiction, the complexity and tortuousness of the human mind, appear to entail that the target one shoots at may not be the one hit, though the "misses" can be more interesting than the original objective.

Moral aims, the desire to reinforce values, clearly ask much of the artist. They skirt the relationship of man to the absolute, and his connection with the spiritual or ideal. They need to take into account such difficult areas as motivation, decision, choice. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the desire to reinforce values often goes astray, especially since values are themselves intrinsically taxing to determine, unless one adopts a simplistic or entirely limited and conventional attitude to them.



I shall consider Richardson and Dickens as examples of the novelist as reinforcer of values. The title page of Pamela echoes the moral dosage which its author frequently expressed elsewhere. The novel is intended "to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes." It also aims to show that virtue enjoys economic as well as other rewards.

That Richardson's overt intentions are subverted by the ambiguity of his fictional structures is a commonplace; yet it is worth noting, since it reinforces the comments that have previously been made on the gap between intention and execution, and urges the problematical nature even of what looks like a straightforward moral intent. While his external comments on the rôle of fiction may be "flatly moralistic" to quote Ian Watt, while he must secure the death of Clarissa since a virtuous woman cannot survive rape and remain virtuous, while he is forced to place Pamela in the morally invidious position of remaining at Mr. B's while enduring intolerable assaults on her virtue, the sensibility of the writer is such that it circumvents plain message and straightforward moral to create fiction of great ambiguity. For while Richardson may pay lip service to the reward of unstained virtue, or the fact that the pure and good Clarissa can only meet her true guerdon in heaven, he has sufficient awareness (whether conscious or no) of the confusion and subtlety of human motives and behaviour to build into these novels a querying of such a simplistic view.

We may appreciate the apparent message by direct statement, but the apprehension of the play backwards and forwards between attraction and the desire to do what is intellectually perceived to be right is experienced far more powerfully through the feelings in Pamela and Clarissa. Richardson would never state - I doubt that he would dare to acknowledge to himself - the idea that while Clarissa is good, her sensibility is in some ways a perverse one. There are nuances in the novel which indicate that his heroine is conscious of her situation in such a way that she simultaneously derives both horror and an obscure satisfaction from it. This makes his moral examination in these two novels (for Pamela is a similar though much more dull case) infinitely richer and more intelligent than his external comments would lead us to believe; and his influence in this respect on fiction has been profound. His initiation of the close and painstaking examination of human psychology created a time-honoured and vital tradition in English fiction, with brilliant exponents such as Jane Austen and George Eliot to its credit. More important for my purpose, this confluence does not merely dwell on manners for their own sake, but broadens the issue to embrace the moral life. One of the questions Richardson poses in his fiction, so often echoed in nineteenth and twentieth century novels, is not "How are people what they are?" but "Being what they are, how can people do what they conceive to be right?". This is a question I shall need to return to in

my examination of Doris Lessing and Iris Murdoch's fiction.

I have suggested that Dickens also assumes the rôle, at times, of reinforcer of society's values, though this is plainly but one aspect of his multiform moral vision. Richardson's prompt assumption of the didactic stance was in part a response to the requirements of his public. A large sector of the eighteenth century audience desired the serious presentation of everyday reality to help it cope with the new onus of individual choice and decision.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the nineteenth century reader faced far greater stresses and pressures; and possibly needed to be reminded, above all, that he was one of many, a being supported by the comforting presence of those like him. G. D. Klingopulos speaks of the Victorian novel's assistance in strengthening "the feeling of human solidarity at a time of disruptive social change".<sup>2</sup> Dickens' sanctification of the home and domestic ties, his idealized portraits of female characters like Agnes in David Copperfield, Esther in Bleak House, or Florence in Dombey and Son, all point to an effort, whether conscious or not, to secure society's

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1 See, for example, Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel, 1963, p. 61, or Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, 1968, p. 491, or earlier commentators like, Hippolyte Taine, History of English Literature, 1890.

2 G. D. Klingopulos, "The Literary Scene", in The Pelican Guide to English Literature, From Dickens to Hardy, 1972, vol. 6, p. 72.



base, to make safe man's last bastion against a hostile world, to quieten contemporary unease. The modesty, gentleness and silent assumption of duty of these characters, the goodness, fecundity and right feelings of families like the Toodles in Dombey and Son are an idealized embodiment of what the home, the family and the female should be. The odour of sanctity, not to say sanctimoniousness is pervasive.

A novel like Dombey and Son, with its contrasted households of the Toodles and the Dombey's, the paralleled relationships between characters like Florence and her mother, Edith and Mrs. Skewton, Walter and his uncle, encourages the reader to sense that the familial relationship is the centre from which right feeling and conduct can either radiate out or be withered. From this spring, society is either refreshed or poisoned. Dickens was thus confirming those ties in fiction which proved more problematical to him in life; but to leave the matter there would prove a distortion.

For in this novel, powerful as I think the pulls towards right affection, duty, or family ties are, there are contrary pulls which deny any didactic impulse too straightforward a progress. Graham Greene sees Dickens' vision of existence as Manichean; and the groundswell of



disquiet created by characters like Mrs. Brown, the Major, or even Carker, and the author's apprehension of change and upheaval, is such that domestic ties, or personal relationships appear as, at best, frail barks against darker forces. The novel's equipoise is an uneasy one; and many readers find the darker vision more compulsive than the glowing but circumscribed light cast by the family circle. Again one notes the paradoxical embodiment of the author's conscious intention which is a consequence, in part, of his intuitive apprehension of evil.

None of the contemporary writers treated here see themselves as a mentor in the sense I have instanced, so that I turn now to consider the questioning of moral values in fiction. The verb to question embraces a number of different meanings, two of which I shall employ in delimiting this category.

The most familiar sense in which it is used is possibly "to call in question, to dispute, or oppose" (Oxford English Dictionary). By this definition, to question moral values in fiction is to criticize either specific examples of misplaced or superficial values, or the attitudes which have given rise to them. Equally, the novelist may query the absence of moral values, since he sees their omission as regrettable. He may, or may not

provide alternatives; but such an approach implies (although it can range in intensity) the desire to correct, and therefore entails the assumption of the rôle of mentor. Hence it is a further manifestation of the didactic impulse; and is, as stated previously, the reverse of the coin of the novelist as the reinforcer of values.

A second definition, however, is much broader in scope. In this sense, to question is "to ask or put questions, to investigate" (Oxford English Dictionary). The stance of the questioner is thus speculative rather than hostile. He desires to investigate rather than teach, to lay open a subject for his audience. His impulse is not therefore initially didactic, nor is it reflective, as in the first category examined. There moral values tended to be recorded merely as an element of the novelist's material. Here, questions may be asked of them, or enquiries into them effectively pursued.

I am aware that I attempt a subtle distinction here; and that the novelist who questions values in the critical sense may also be the novelist who explores them with more detachment. The latter stage may well precede the former. To aid clarification, I would like to take an aspect of Dickens' work to flesh out the concept of the novelist as critic, and consider George Eliot as an example of the more speculative questioner.

Dickens provides an excellent and fascinating example of the novelist able to expose and attack specific evils and examples of superficial or non-existent values, while often simultaneously striking at the basic attitudes and assumptions which have given rise to these local abuses. He attempts, didactically, by means of his fiction, to correct them. Novels like Nicholas Nickleby and Bleak House select specific targets, the former the farming out of children into the hands of cruel, inefficient and immoral masters, the latter, the monstrous sprawling abuse of the court of Chancery. Other novels select, almost, it seems, in the manner of a mediaeval morality play, as I have observed, particular vices to be satirized or gayed: in Martin Chuzzlewit it is selfishness, in Dombey and Son, pride. But any reading of these novels which saw their achievement only in terms of these very localized and circumscribed aims, would surely be a limited one. There is much more at work than the knocking down of some particular aunt sallies, even in the early fiction.

In his preface to Bleak House (aside from his amusing examples in support of the theory of spontaneous combustion) Dickens is at pains to assure his public that what he has written of the court of Chancery is true. He speaks of a case like that of his fictitious Gridley, and terms it "a monstrous wrong"; and suggests that it is "wholesome" for the public to know "what has been doing, and still is doing",



in connection with the hydra-headed Chancery. Thus he aims to disclose the fruitless and ruinous expense incurred in chancery suits, and to portray the madness, despair and suffering which, in his view, inevitably attend upon them. He hopes to show that the institution of Chancery no longer achieves the function for which it was set up; and that those who administer it are either cynical or self-deceived. His criticism of such errors extends implicitly to the society which tolerates such an abuse; and the result of his exposure will, he trusts, be correction and reform.

The novel brilliantly achieves these ends by a multiplicity of means I could not and should not attempt to summarize. It is noteworthy, however, that if his satirical parallel between Krook and the Lord Chancellor, or the manic pathos of a character like Miss Flite fail to move and convince the reader, the slow degeneration and moral collapse of a character like Richard, or the image of the tentacles of Chancery creeping insidiously and perniciously throughout society, from Lady Dedlock down to Jo, are likely to clinch the case. But the novel is much more than this.

For while, on one level, Bleak House derives much power from its ability to hit specific targets like Chancery, Mrs. Jellyby or Harold Skimpole with precision, it also

achieves profounder and more interesting effects. A major theme of the novel is the confusion and conflict within society of different sets or schemes of value, of which Chancery is but one example. The values of aristocratic society, of the legal system (as exemplified by the court of Chancery), of philanthropists like Mrs. Jellyby, of Bleak House itself, overlap and compete with each other; and one of the novel's functions is the attempt to clarify this confusion, to render the issues so that the reader can observe them afresh. Dickens is himself clear in his estimate of these competing systems of values; and leaves the reader in no doubt as to who or what he considers to be right. Yet his skill in rendering the interaction and counterclaims of such systems tends to make the reader as aware of the complexity of existence (and hence the difficult nature of judging right and wrong) as he is of the firmness of the author's judgements. These notions of confusion or conflict are underpropped by Dickens' insight into the intertwining of good and evil, and the pervasive power of the latter. Bleak House's "happy" ending is thus considerably undercut by the monstrous confusion which has preceded it; and the smallpox which has pitted Esther's complexion might be seen as the symbolic scarring even of innocence in the fallen world which the author envisages.

I suggest, then, that the effect on the reader is a subtle one. On one level he accepts Dickens' overt

judgements of good and evil and his assumptions on the clarity of moral issues. At a deeper level, however, he has been encouraged to recognize the complexity of existence. His imaginative apprehension of the range and variety of life has been enhanced. He is thus, perhaps, less likely to make simplistic assumptions about values or individuals. His response may be a more thoughtful one. The encouragement of such perception (however slight) I would want to see as helpful to the reader's own moral life; and to this concept of the encouragement of increased sensibility I shall return in the chapters on the individual novelists and in my conclusion.

To Dickens' often polemical and volatile approach to the criticism of values can be contrasted George Eliot's more rational and speculative stance. She can, if she chooses, hit localized targets too. In Daniel Deronda, for example, she hopes to correct a particular attitude, that is, hostility towards the Jewish race. But in general, she begins her work with fewer targets and preconceptions than Dickens; and can indeed allow the very process of her fiction to modify some of her viewpoints.

I have termed her approach philosophical and speculative. It is as if she comes to her fiction to lay out and consider moral values and choices in as scientific a fashion



as possible. She wants to look at some examples of values, to consider the nature of qualities, to ponder on the results and implications which follow from them. To Dickens' assertion, "Here is a good person", she replies, "We need to examine what that term signifies".

To this pursuit, she inevitably brings certain preconceptions, but they are seldom prejudices. Among these are her historical, philosophical and ethical sense, which fuse fruitfully with her firm grasp of actuality. She thus provides a framework or perspective for her fiction, which entails the frequent juxtaposition of concrete individuals and acts, with larger ideals or concepts. Thus a character like Mr. Bulstrode, who for Dickens would probably have provided an apt satirical target, is seen as the product of a particular set of individual and social circumstances and emotional needs. His behaviour is implicitly tested against the Christian ethic which he professes and perverts. Similarly, Dorothea appears as a unique and lovingly particularized individual and as a young woman standing at a peculiarly important and difficult social and historical interface. She also is placed against the yardstick of her own ideas of vocation, as are other characters in Middlemarch like Lydgate, or as the Dodsons are placed against the ideals of Christianity in The Mill on the Floss.



An assumption, possibly about the way to do good to the world, is tested by concrete examples; and the results of such a process are subtle and brilliant. It entails a constant play back and forth between concrete example and abstract precept or ideal, between behaviour and ethic. The reader does not emerge with a simple-minded notion of a conclusion of judgement, yet feels (by a superb trick of fiction and vision) that all the materials he could possibly require to make as perceptive an analysis of situation and character as possible have been provided. The act of placing the individual over against the larger frame entails judgement, yet it is so sympathetically and intelligently managed, and the author is so comprehensive in her grasp of aspects and nuances of behaviour and motivation that the judgements of other novelists appear naïve and punitive by comparison.

It is not an easy method, since it requires prodigious mental powers on the part of the novelist, and the reader must also bring much to the pursuit. I isolate it here not only as an example of the novelist as speculative questioner; but also to anticipate a later comparison between this method and the approach of Doris Lessing in her great fictional sequence, The Children of Violence. There I argue that her protagonist, Martha Quest, is seen within a framework provided by her author's genetic, social, psychological and historical senses; and her questioning of values, like George Eliot's, is often by implicit refer-

ence to this broader perspective. So radical, though, are her conclusions that she is forced to rephrase what is meant by the term "moral values", as I shall later uncover.

I want now to consider the relationship between the four contemporary novelists and this model of the novelist as questioner of values. Initially, I shall investigate the sub heading of fiction as a criticism of moral values, which, it was argued, betrayed a didactic impulse.

Certain aspects of Doris Lessing's work can profitably be seen in terms of this category. In many of her short stories and in the early novels of the Martha Quest sequence, she is concerned to exploit and expose the inhumanity of the colour bar in Africa. Her approach to this tendentious subject is not, on the whole, naïve or crudely polemical; for stories like No Witchcraft for Sale, A Home for the Highland Cattle, or The Old Chief Mshlanga uncover the complexity of broader issues, deny simplistic solutions and cogently alert the reader to the urgency of the situation. As with Dickens' vision of Chancery, the colour bar is but a local manifestation of that "atrophy of the imagination" which neglects to see itself in everything that breathes under the sun. It is a particular example of perverted and illusory values. Her criticism of society's values is continued in The Four-Gated City, where

English society is initially seen as conformist and class-ridden and, later, as set on a calamitous course.

Some of her early comments on the purpose and function of art are comparably didactic in intent. She speaks out of a deep love of humanity, and urges the writer to use once more his "small personal voice" to reaffirm faith in man.<sup>1</sup>

An aspect of George Eliot's work was examined to convey the concept of the novelist as investigator of moral values. Her constant effort to set man over against absolute standards or concepts frequently discloses the dichotomy between man and ideal. She evokes the fullest sense of the difficult and unending nature of the moral life. She also reveals a world where moral choice and decision are endemic. In all these respects, she can be closely compared to Iris Murdoch, who not only approaches her fiction in a similarly speculative fashion; but who also, despite her love of the bizarre and grotesque, often achieves comparable effects.

She is, as has been stated, a moral philosopher; and essays like "The Idea of Perfection" and her monograph

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1 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", in Declaration, 1957, p. 27.



on Sartre expose her acute concern with the moral life and her fear that current pictures of man are inadequate and misleading. The concept of good she sees as the tool of every rational man<sup>1</sup>; and just as George Eliot's notion of the meshing of man and society led her to embody such concepts in the "web" of Middlemarch, so Iris Murdoch seeks to test out aspects of her philosophy in her fiction. Against ideas of the rational "willing" of goodness, of simple choice and hence right behaviour, she sets a "darker" picture of man. She accepts a "less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality";<sup>2</sup> and entertains the idea of grace divorced from its Christian context. Novels like The Sacred and Profane Love Machine embody and explore such ideas; they chart the, for her, "characteristically endless" nature of the "moral task".<sup>3</sup> The portrayal of a character like Harriet in that novel, or Ann in An Unofficial Rose are attempts to explore how far, and in what ways an unexamined life can be virtuous. They are thus fictional enquiries into a philosophical viewpoint, itself a rejection, as she acknowledges, of some current views of man. This aspect of her work is crucial and interesting; and will later be surveyed in depth.

Within this category of the novelist as questioner

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", in The Sovereignty of Good, 1970, p. 4.

2 *ibid*, pp. 43-44.

3 *ibid*, p. 28.

of values, I would also like to place certain aspects of the work of the two Catholic novelists, Graham Greene and Muriel Spark. To do so requires a nice distinction. They are not critics of values in the Dickensian sense, since they do not possess a "social" aim, although Graham Greene, like Dickens, frequently strikes a humanitarian note. Nor are they questioners of values quite in the way that George Eliot is; for they do not employ her open-ended and speculative approach. Rather their faith provides them with a context in which to place moral values; and that frame encourages them not to see temporal ethical judgements as final or even, at times, desirable. For example, in a novel like Brighton Rock, Graham Greene wishes to question the primacy of moral judgements. He desires to set over against the temporal "moral" view of Ida, spiritual notions such as grace and damnation. In The Quiet American, he again contrasts secular ideology with the religious view; and the effect of that novel is powerfully to query the reader's previous assumptions. Muriel Spark, on the other hand, in Memento Mori, portrays her characters *sub specie aeternitatis*. She urges the reader not to pity the frail and dying, nor concentrate on their moral natures, since they are in the process of facing God and Truth, entities more meaningful to her than moral categories, or limited human judgements. In the chapters on these two novelists, I shall pick up these contentions.

The novelist who questions values, whether critically or speculatively, may well also eventually attempt to rephrase them. Indeed, I have previously commented that Doris Lessing provides an example of such a development.<sup>1</sup> The criticism of misplaced or inadequate values does not necessarily entail the radical questioning of the assumptions which lie behind them. In the final category, that of the rephrasing of values, however, the novelist frequently rejects not only external standards themselves, but also society's right to apply these to the behaviour of others. He attempts to present a positive alternative to traditional concepts or schemes of value which he feels are irrelevant, or clumsy, or inappropriate. Frequently he argues, too, that such ideas are dependent upon a mistaken view of man and society. For traditional concepts of right and wrong behaviour based, perhaps, on the Christian ethic or the humanist tradition, he often wishes to substitute a more delicate and intuitive scale of values. He may posit an "ethic of feeling" as an alternative to traditional moral absolutes. Occasionally, others argue that the aesthetic is itself moral, that the art object, qua art object, encompasses a moral function.<sup>2</sup> A crude analogy may clarify the position.

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1 see p. 33.

2 see John Casey, The Language of Criticism, 1966, Chapter 9, for a fascinating account of this viewpoint as it relates to Matthew Arnold.



I used Dickens as an example of the novelist as critic of some of society's moral values. For example, his vivid and sympathetic account of the circumstances of many fallen women implies the desirability of a less rigorous attitude towards them on the part of society. But overall, he accepts and condones traditional notions and standards; and, more important, he endorses the concept that society and individuals have a right to apply those standards. In other words, he believes in absolute notions of right and wrong, and the relevance of standards based on such concepts.

By contrast, writers like D. H. Lawrence and Doris Lessing wish to do away with "the ugly imperialism of any absolute"; they deny the autonomy of external standards. For them the individual becomes the source of value; and an "ethic of feeling" is substituted for rational judgements based on ideals or immutable standards. They can be seen as latter-day Romantics; and their desire to reformulate ideas of morality emerges frequently as an urgent reassertion of man's essential harmony with the universe. They argue for a balance and unity within man himself, and, simultaneously, a oneness with the world that gave them birth.

Lawrence defines morality as follows:-

"And morality is that delicate, for ever trembling and changing balance between me and my circumambient universe, which precedes and accompanies a true relatedness."<sup>1</sup>

It is thus not the dramatization of human dilemma. It does not entail the placing of man over against larger standards or values. Ethical considerations, distinctions between right and wrong behaviour, good and bad, are irrelevant. In the place of a distinction like that framed at the beginning of this chapter, Lawrence substitutes a notion of an equipoise between man and his environment. Man must be directed back to the true dark sources of his strength. Until he is, he will remain like Gerald in Women in Love, partly inert, partly dead. Once he is whole and at one with the universe, he will be "moral"; to live or be otherwise is "immoral".

That Lawrence attempts something very difficult in framing a definition of morality like that quoted above is manifest; and a reading of Women in Love suggests that other standards, some of them much more closely aligned to traditional values, still operate in that novel. Indeed, reflection on the topic of man and morality leads one to

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1 D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel" in Selected Literary Criticism, 1961, p. 109.

question whether he can ever fully escape traditional concepts of right and wrong. The reasons for considering certain behaviour "moral" or "immoral" may vary; but the distinction seems fundamental to thinking man. At a subconscious level, one sees the rightness of Lawrence's effort. Absolute standards can crucify; to pay scrupulous attention to the moral law is not necessarily to be good. But one also feels that traditional ethical notions are necessary if man is to live harmoniously with his fellows. I do not think that Lawrence intended to usurp entirely such desirable functions, although aspects of his work suggest that the concept of civilized society becomes increasingly meaningless for him. In this respect (and indeed in many others) he can be fruitfully compared with Doris Lessing. As her work develops and unfolds, her prophetic and apocalyptic vision echoes his in scope and fervour. It is little wonder that, ultimately, conventional morality is for her, too, an empty concept.

Very early in her career, she communicated her view that absolutes were not a viable means of viewing conduct or existence.<sup>1</sup> Her experience of the troubled continent of Africa or the upheavals brought about by World War II rendered rigid standards inert or inflexible. It was her

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1 Doris Lessing, Declaration, p. 20.



view that man had continually and continuously to make up his own mind, unsupported by the comfort of religion, or even political ideology. He had to insist on his right to his "small personal voice"; and thus be true to himself and his own precariously forged standards. She has always seen such a process as taxing, often employing the metaphor of balance, as Lawrence does. In the sequence of Martha Quest novels, she exposes her central protagonist to this enterprise. The reader watches Martha engaged in the contentious business of forging a life view and a life ethic. He sees her, for example, rejecting conventional normative views of her marriage, which she gradually realizes must be destroyed as the feelings and union involved in it are meaningless. Her husband regards her as a body or as an appendage legally bestowed upon him by society. She is unable to realize her whole self in marriage, and, consequently, to achieve a satisfactory union with other individuals or society at large. It is thus an immoral connection because it denies wholeness and fruition to both parties; and Martha moves against conventional notions of duty and fidelity to husband and child in breaking it.

But in her late work, moral values are not just "rephrased", they are virtually replaced. Martha Quest forges her own standards; she evolves an "ethic of feeling"; but it is still an ethic. The concepts of right and

wrong lie behind it; and her creator's assumption is that man's attempt to clarify moral issues will eventually bring about improvement. Sufism, however, leads her to accept a mystical view of life. Notions of good and evil, however they are defined, become less relevant. Acceptance and openness to God supersede efforts to work for a better world. In the chapter on Doris Lessing, I shall substantiate these claims.

Before I pass on to establish some sense of the plurality of views of man, existence and values current today, some of the implications or questions raised by the preceding analysis merit statement or reiteration. I urged that the models put forward were not mutually exclusive. The scope of fiction itself and the ambitious range of some of the novelists under consideration entail the fact that they can be seen in more than one light, since their approach to the treatment of moral values has more than one facet. Hence, I have argued that Doris Lessing is at times didactic, while she is also a reformulator of the term "moral values".

The often puzzling gap between a novelist's "moral" intention and its fictional embodiment has also emerged. I have implied, too (using the example of Bleak House) that a novel as well as achieving a specific moral purpose, can also encompass what could be termed a secondary moral effect;

that is it could alert the reader to the ethical potential of existence, or possibly encourage him to see moral dilemmas anew. Some reasons for these paradoxes have been suggested; but they are not only interesting and perplexing, they also throw into sharp relief the position of the reader - an issue of significance, I believe, in relation to the treatment of values in fiction. They also invite one to speculate on the "effects" of fiction. These two considerations, the position of the reader, and the influence of fiction upon him will be raised in subsequent chapters.

In an article on "the great debate" on education, Father Patrick Barry, headmaster of Ampleforth College, comments:-

"Society is much more fluid now and is not so certain of itself. Two wars, a period of illusory affluence, the crisis of power, of pollution, of the economy, the vacuum of leadership and political and ideological conflicts in the world have seen to that. If society is so changeable and divided and so unsure of itself, how can adults claim to impose conformity on the young; and anyway, conformity to what?"<sup>1</sup>

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1 Father Patrick Barry, "Can discipline and Freedom Exist Side by Side in our Schools?" in The Times, Tuesday March the 29th, 1977.



The confusion of views and values within education itself provides a microcosm of a broader conflict within society. As a consequence of rapid and dynamic social, political, philosophical and economic change, we no longer possess a commonly held view of perceived reality. It is possible today still to maintain the Christian view of man and existence, and thus to endorse the values it entails. Yet as critics within the Church prove, such a position is often tenuously or paradoxically maintained, and is far from being "a safe stronghold".

It is also possible to view man from the Marxist viewpoint; he thus becomes subject to an inexorable economic determinism. To Skinner and his followers, he is an apt subject for conditioning; to a liberal humanist, he is a creature to be valued in and for himself, whose rationality may prove the key to his eventual salvation. Whereas to a Freudian, he is much more subject to unconscious desires and pressures than such a picture would suggest.

These contrasted and contrasting views of man and society, and the beliefs and values which follow from them, do not exist neatly side by side today; but rather overlap and fertilize each other in a way which is often confusing and puzzling. It is possible to adopt or hold one of the innumerable viewpoints current in a straightforward fashion; but I would suggest that the pressures against this are considerable, as indeed they always have been for any

thinking man. Terms such as Christian Socialist, or Catholic Marxist are common; and while one might assume that the categories they embrace are mutually exclusive, or imply significant tensions, experience of contemporary society and thought suggests a fair degree of borrowing from viewpoint to viewpoint.

We can perhaps compare our situation to times of previous ferment. The re-discovery of the ancients (among other stresses) encouraged Renaissance man to evolve a new concept of honour, as the plays of a writer like Webster reveal. The Christian code thus had to "square" with aspects of classical thought. But a world where mass and rapid communication prevails is one where the stimulus to adjust and question one's assumptions is not only ever present, but increasingly urgent and difficult. We also perceive more options. I do not know if we feel the pressure to adjust more strongly than Shakespeare and his contemporaries; I only know that an increasing number of individuals feel that the time for such adjustment is potentially brief.

There are, I think, significant repercussions for fiction arising from the current plurality of views and standards. Most relevant to this topic as I see it is the effect on the rôle of the author. I argued previously that eighteenth century didactic writers like Richardson

clearly assumed that they ought, could, or did affect their public by inculcating standards of virtuous behaviour. A shared system of values and a relatively homogeneous audience made such confidence possible. Dickens also welcomed this function; and George Eliot in comments external to her fiction urges inexorably that the writer fulfils the role of teacher.<sup>1</sup> Within her novels, however, she displays a subtle insight into the increasing gap between author and audience; and reveals her apprehension that they may not share common standards or assumptions. Much of her fiction is, in fact, devoted to creating a notion of herself as a fit interpreter of life. In Chapter 7 of Adam Bede, "In which the story Pauses a Little", she attempts to establish her bona fides; and Middlemarch, with its multiplicity of images of the lens or reflector type repeats the effect. By these means, she hopes to persuade her readers that she can and ought to handle human affairs and values in a way helpful to them. Her practice is thus instructive in considering the plight of the contemporary novelist, who cannot even presume on the amount of common ground between him and his audience which she could. If he wishes to treat moral values at all, he plainly faces considerable problems.

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1 George Eliot, "Leaves from a Notebook: Authorship", quoted in Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel, 1959, p. 94.



It is unwise to pronounce on the relationship between writer and public today. George Eliot's example would suggest that it was already flying apart in the nineteenth century; and there is a sense in which the closeness between a writer like Dickens and his public would be unlikely now. Which public, one wants to ask? Which writers? Mass publication and a new army of readers render the issue complex in the extreme, so that any conclusions must be conditional. However, the plurality of views of man and value systems render it less feasible that the novelist will speak out even to a segment of the reading public in the manner of a Dickens. Even if he possesses strong views or a didactic impulse, his appeal will probably be to a sub group, the converted, as it were. Or he will face the more difficult task of creating his own audience, and here he may need to mute his views in anticipation of hostility, or embody them in as persuasive a fashion as possible. These considerations are, I think, relevant to the work of a Catholic novelist like Graham Greene, but they relate to the work of the other three contemporary novelists too.

The writer has now to establish his common ground; and here he may adopt a variety of expedients. Greene exploits the reader's love of excitement and the lure of narrative to achieve serious dimensions in novels like,

The Honorary Consul. Iris Murdoch concentrates latterly on love relationships to achieve her ambitious ends. For Muriel Spark, the implacable and immutable nature of eternity can best be set off by the comic frenzies of *la dolce vita*. Doris Lessing enshrines a highly serious purpose in a novel like Briefing for a Descent into Hell, by means of images of a poetic power and resonance. The reader is pulled into the fiction by means like these; the suspension of disbelief entails the acceptance of the novel's value structure. This has, of course, always been, to a degree, the approach and effect of fiction; but I note now the range, complexity and flexibility of the artist's endeavours to achieve this traditional end.

The novelist's stance in the face of the perplexing multiplicity of standards is likely to be a questioning one; he will emphasize, even more than novelists in the past, the ambiguity and complexity of values. This, indeed, is the position of the four contemporary novelists under discussion. They question values, rephrase them, worry over them; and generally are closer to my later models than the earlier ones. None of them, rightly, can allow their audience to approach the difficult area of morality simplistically. I hope later to substantiate these assertions.

Finally, I have briefly to relate Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing to current

views of man and existence; but I do not wish to over-anticipate the detailed work on this in the individual chapters which follow.

Graham Greene and Muriel Spark are both converts to Roman Catholicism. Neither, however, is a straightforward or unequivocal Catholic. They do not conform to what might be termed a conventional pattern. The former states that he was converted to Catholicism by a set of intellectual propositions prior to his marriage; but rather it seems to be the case that these acted as confirmation of some of the existing preconceptions expressed in The Lost Childhood. He states that he feared early that human nature was not black and white, but "black and grey"; thus there could be no hope for doomed and damned man without faith. But, paradoxically, he has continually affirmed the belief that religious truths are somehow too "hard" for man, echoing his notion, perhaps, that the strict application of standards is punitive and inappropriate. The idea of grace, of God's charitable acceptance of the sinner, is integral to his moral and fictional vision. He urges constantly (in view of our calamitous human predicament) that the rôle of judge is God's not man's.

Within his fiction, a considerable tension exists between religious and moral values. Characters like Pinkie or the whisky priest are clearly seen to fall short of moral



standards; yet the spiritual dimensions of their natures and lives may reduce the force of such judgements. The implications of secular ideology, the inadequacy of limited human "moral" concerns are probed in novels like The Quiet American. But Greene does not conclude such investigations with an easy acceptance of what might be termed the religious viewpoint, since man in his fiction often appears to be "hunted" by God to his pain and sorrow. Moreover, many of his conclusions are conditional. He thus clearly provides a fascinating case for study in the context of his treatment of moral values.

Muriel Spark is equally absorbing in this respect. For her Catholicism affords an earnest of eternal verities. Her allegiance is directed towards the "facts" of her faith. The eternal world floats implacably past the temporal one. Man can never uncover or approach it.<sup>1</sup> It is as if Catholicism is for her a Platonic ideal which individual Catholics merely pervert or distort; and believers within her pages, on the whole, merit very short shrift. The crazed order over which the Abbess of Crewe presides is an apt fictional symbol of the "Catholic" world.

A tension exists for her between her spiritual and artistic ideals. At times, she insists fiction is play

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1 Muriel Spark, The Takeover, 1976, pp. 180-181.

and untruth; at others, she appears to believe that it can provide a means of sorting out the mess of human existence. The reverberations of poetry and linguistic play absorb and fascinate her; and novels like The Takeover, in reflecting this enchantment, occasionally imply that here resides another kind of truth.

I have previously referred to her preoccupation with manners. She is a writer who delights in the surface of life; and in her manipulation of it, she discloses a very sharp moral sense, a satirical appreciation of the gap between human ideals and their actual realization.

Neither of these Catholic writers apply the standards consequent upon their faith mechanically. They have a sharp awareness of the problematical nature of the moral life. To this can be directly compared Iris Murdoch's notion of the "endless" nature of "moral tasks"; for she believes we have not only to understand rationally what these tasks entail, which is itself a testing process, but also to attempt their consequent and difficult execution.

I have crudely termed her position as that of a liberal humanist; but part of her endeavour within her fiction is to employ Christian concepts, such as love or grace, divorced from their traditional framework. She does

not believe, I think, that absolutes or ideals exist per se; but views them as concepts which may guide and direct specific action; they provide levers and mechanisms to set the moral life into motion. Moral concepts present man with a vocabulary and terminology to explicate his life in the deepest sense.<sup>1</sup>

Fiction for her, as I have stated, is a means of testing out some aspects of her moral philosophy. Just as a tenet of that philosophy is that "the central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love"<sup>2</sup>, so the endeavour of many of her novels is to portray that individual in all his contingency and oddity, and to uncover the consequences of his efforts to know and love those other individuals who make up his world.

The ambitious and interesting nature of such an undertaking is, I think, readily apparent. Doris Lessing, too, approaches fiction with large and far-reaching aims. She is less theoretical and abstractly philosophical than Iris Murdoch; but her empirical grasp of movements and overall social and cultural changes within the twentieth

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 28.

2 *ibid*, p. 30.



century is impressive. In fact, she might be thought, in her aspirations to chart the relations of "the individual with the collective" to exemplify an aspect of the English writer's ideals.

She begins as a committed Marxist; for Marxism provided her with an attempt at a "world-mind, a world ethic"; and she demands temperamentally and intellectually an inclusive view of man and existence. Embedded within her political ideology, however, was a concern for man as an individual and a conscience. She saw him, as I have observed, as a creature who needed continuously to exercise his own judgement, balancing the demands and views of society with his own needs and assumptions. Her refusal to employ ready-made solutions makes her comparable to the other three novelists examined here. Such a refusal helps to explain, too, her early disenchantment with the Marxist ethic, which was aided, no doubt, by her steady and honourable perception of how things are. Her disillusionment is enshrined in her treatment of politics in The Children of Violence sequence, while she has spoken angrily outside her fiction, of the necessity, throughout her life, to support causes which "stink".

Her rejection of man-made political schemes and sad apprehension of the division between ideology and faction encouraged her to adopt a transcendental view of existence.

Previously she has been termed a latter-day Romantic, which helps to explicate, in my view, her subsequent belief in Sufism. That religion satisfies her sense of a spiritual dimension within man which is denied by more pragmatic schemes, and it also acknowledges an essential harmony between man and the universe. From the days of Declaration, she has expressed a belief in the evolution of a "new man", which finds a mystical expression in the appendix to The Four Gated City. The mutants described there recover what are seen as some of man's lost powers. They hear and see in a less circumscribed way than we mundane mortals. It is a poetic and religious prophecy.

I shall expand these assertions about the beliefs and values of the four novelists in subsequent chapters; and close this part of the thesis in the hope that it has provided a useful framework for the detailed work which follows.

CHAPTER TWO

GRAHAM GREENE



## CHAPTER TWO

GRAHAM GREENE

Chapter One suggested that a helpful critical stance to adopt in the examination of Graham Greene's treatment of morality would be to consider him as a questioner of moral values. It argued that Catholicism provided him with a context in which ethical issues could be placed; and that such a frame often either encourages him to query the adequacy and finality of moral judgements, or to indicate a tension between moral and spiritual views of existence.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Doris Lessing, for example, he may not convey a hostility to traditional moral concepts as such; but his fiction frequently calls those categories powerfully into question in the sense that it exposes the limitations, and hence the usefulness, of the moral viewpoint. He discloses that morality without faith takes no account of the human soul, that "the facts" may be incompatible with Truth, that to obey the moral law to the letter may not be a manifestation of goodness. His fiction therefore invites the reader to leave any final judgement of issues and characters to God, since we yet see "through a glass, darkly". It can also movingly celebrate His power and glory.

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1 see pp. 36 - 37.

In this chapter, I shall put forward the view that some of his fiction can profitably be seen as modified parables. Brighton Rock and The Power and the Glory are taken as examples of this. Later works, such as The Heart of the Matter and The Honorary Consul, are seen to move closer to naturalistic fiction; but the moral dilemmas within these novels are still very sharply exposed and rendered in a more urgent light than is the case with many novelists.

The chapter begins with an examination of the function of scene and setting in Graham Greene's work in an attempt to establish the polarized and obsessive nature of his vision of the world. It also aims to disclose the simultaneously actual and symbolic nature of his settings. These are more than backcloths to his fictions: in the novels which I suggest are modified parables, scene is itself an actor in the moral drama, rather in the traditional manner of a Bunyan. In the more naturalistic works, it provides a microcosm of man's condition, and a powerful means of focusing on the investigation of spiritual and moral conflict.

Next the nature and function of his fictional heroes is discussed. The aim here is to discern whether Graham Greene treats his characters as symbolic or naturalistic

figures, to discover what the nature of the moral and spiritual issues which face them are, and to draw out the consequent implications for his treatment of moral values.

The chapter concludes with an attempt to sum up Graham Greene's treatment of moral values in the works under review.



## The Function of Scene and Setting in the Work of Graham Greene

Laterite paths glowing rose in the sunset, golden light over paddy fields, legless beggars fighting brutally in a cracked post office, stacked chairs at Brighton, a high plateau of crooked crosses remote from civilization, politicians absurdly crowded together on a precarious boat - these are all images from the work of Graham Greene, sharp, memorable and evocative: they are also peculiarly characteristic.

That Graham Greene thinks in scenes and images appears incontestable; apart from one's own experience of his work, there is much critical testimony on the point, from G. S. Fraser's comment on his "sharply visualized" scenes to the chorus on the physiognomy of "Greeneland". Philip Stratford suggests that Nature in Greene's writing is always "inert or decomposing", while the attraction of the "seedy" (an adjective Greene now confesses he wishes he had never used) was manifest from the time of Journey Without Maps. Concrete images abound, evoked in his crisp economical style, so that a few phrases or sentences are all that is needed to create the leper colony in A Burnt-Out Case, Pinkie's room in Brighton Rock, or the shanty town of The Honorary Consul. Such is the continuity of Graham Greene's consciousness, too, that certain images recur, so that one finds descriptions from The Lawless Roads repeated in almost identical terms in

The Power and the Glory; and the image of the border is constantly reworked, though it stems originally from his childhood apprehension of the green baize door separating his home and his school as the division between peace and happiness and horror and degradation.

Yet there is more at work here than a characteristic slant of vision, a cast of mind; for in addition to celebrating certain aspects of the empirical world, Graham Greene's end is religious truth; and for this he creates a scene which is symbolic as well as real; he makes his setting an actor of significance in his moral dramas, with overtones as symbolic as any scene in Bunyan or Spenser. Without such a treatment, his parables would not function so effectively. His comments on his work tend to underplay its religious dimension, since he asserts that he is not "a Catholic novelist", though a recent preface to a new edition of Brighton Rock (1970) sadly acknowledges that the religious persecution in Mexico and the Spanish civil war inextricably involved religion in contemporary life. In fact, I should argue that the terms in which he constantly visualizes life - good/evil, black/white, Hell, damnation - in his criticism, fiction and travel books suggest that he is an emphatically religious writer, unable to escape the apprehension that the spectrum of experience is an eternal one, though such a scale enforces his miserable fear that man is damned. Indeed Samuel Hynes suggests that all

excitement in Graham Greene's fiction is a means to an end, truth, which he defines as follows:-

"For Greene, the truth is religious: not always specifically Catholic, or even Christian in any exact doctrinal sense, but concerned with a vision of human life that postulates the reality of 'another world'."<sup>1</sup>

Such a view appears to take little cognisance of the excessive contemporaneity of Graham Greene's fiction, its stress on the actual and empirical, the mundane. Nevertheless, it is basically accurate; and the pull between the "real world", described as it is in all its doubtful glory, and the world of eternal values is one of the hallmarks of Graham Greene's fiction, and constitutes much of its interest.

The attraction which extreme locales have always held for him then becomes clear. Extremes of climate (as in Africa, Mexico, Haiti, Vietnam) extremes of oppression and persecution (as in Mexico and Haiti) extremes of political absolutism (as in Havana) are fascinating in themselves (for Graham Greene is obsessed by the limits of human endurance and passion) and they also point up the extremes of human behaviour and conduct. It is difficult to espouse moderate

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1 ed. Samuel Hynes, Graham Greene. A Collection of Critical Essays, 1973, p. 2.



causes and codes in the climate - mental and physical - of Mexico or Vietnam; life is reduced to stark and primary terms; and the human actors in the cosmic drama of good versus evil show clearly in their elemental and eternal aspects. The effect is of an almost mediaeval clarity; the scene becomes analogous to a painting by Bosch. Not only does the extremity of the setting (and it can as effectively be Nelson Place, Brighton as the Haiti of the Tontons Macoute) profoundly affect the protagonists - Graham Greene reflects a similar truth to that conveyed by Forster in A Passage to India - but it also shows these protagonists for what they are, good or evil, damned or saved.

But extremes are not only important to Graham Greene because of his far-reaching purpose; and the comparison between his symbolic use of scene and that of other Christian writers like Bunyan or Spenser can only be developed to a limited extent. If pursued, it raises a number of vital questions which centre on the prevalence of squalor within his fiction and the apparent absence of scenes or settings which could provide him with his positives; that is, he has no obvious equivalent to Bunyan's Celestial City, or Spenser's House of Holiness.

It must be admitted, I think, that his mind is fascinated by dirt and decay. Squalid and degraded settings prevail in his fiction, to some extent, because they are

themselves magnetic for their author. In addition, however, they are an earnest of the "terrible aboriginal calamity" in which we are all involved and an apt symbol for their author's dark vision of the fallen state of man. He is very much a child of his century in this saddened viewpoint; for the certainty of a Bunyan would appear to be denied, currently, to all but a very few.

But Graham Greene has a further justification for his dependence on the unlovely. His comments on Henry James show that he is continuously aware that evil highlights good, corruption innocence, treachery truth.<sup>1</sup> Thus a scene like that where the whisky priest in The Power and the Glory is incarcerated in the loathsome prison is both described for its horror and its transparency. It reveals both the bestial nature of man and his appetites and the abyss into which these have dragged him and, by inference, the nobility of which he is also capable. The image of the young girl in spotless white who emerges from the foetid shanty town of The Honorary Consul perhaps sums up this polarizing aspect of Graham Greene's vision. He is unfailingly amazed at the heights which depraved man can attain; and his appalled stress on human weakness makes any moral achievements all the more remarkable to him.

His view of the magnitude of the forces which face

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1 Graham Greene, The Lost Childhood, 1954, p. 24.

man in his struggle for existence and goodness is based on a respect for evil which is something like love. In commenting on the work of Henry James, a novelist whose sense of evil he sees as religious in intensity, he states:-

"For to render the highest justice to corruption you must retain your innocence: you have to be conscious all the time within yourself of treachery to something valuable."<sup>1</sup>

He does not argue that to render the highest justice to innocence, one must preserve a sense or knowledge of corruption, but the reverse. It is as if, in a fallen world, only the inverted premise can make sense.

I want now to look at the presentation of scene in Journey Without Maps and The Lawless Roads before examining that aspect of Graham Greene's work in his fiction, since these two travel books expose his aims and attitudes with explicitness, and are an instructive entry to his treatment of morality.

The epigraphs to Journey Without Maps, the account of a difficult and dangerous journey Graham Greene made to Liberia in 1936, suggest that there is a connection between

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 24.



the events and exploration in the book and the author's urge to self-discovery. Indeed he makes a constant equation between the two, affirming that his attempts to get nearer to the "racial source" were similar to the endeavours of psychoanalysis; and he evocatively implies that part of Africa's fascination for previous explorers may reside in the fact that it is the shape of the human heart. His motives for undergoing such hardships were complex; but a primary source of attraction was the bestial nature of the place, its degradation, despair and disease. Early in the book, he quotes from official publications on Liberia, outlining its massacres, its cruelty and remoteness. Diseases are catalogued with a horrified absorption: the abysmal is magnetic for Graham Greene. Yet it would be misleading to stress merely his fascination with dirt, or even his desire to see how much he could stomach as an individual; for the obliquity of his intellect drew him to Liberia on a more meritorious search; he wanted to see if there was not indeed a kind of beauty in decay, if the ugly and deformed could radiate. Constantly, in this book and in The Lawless Roads he speculates whether we are right to pity those who dwell at subsistence level or below, wondering whether their lives may not be admirable in a way we fail to understand, whether sorrow itself does not point to a previous state of happiness.

It is easy to condemn such an attitude as romantically irresponsible, to accuse Graham Greene of a somewhat slipshod sentimentalism; but he takes account here of the limitation of our habitual perspectives, attempting to get beyond our mental squint. His effort is no more than spasmodic; yet in several places in his work, he reminds the reader that materialism is an insufficient good, that the courtesy of the Mexican peasant who offered him lodging but no food, since he had none, pointed to a quality of living which one could not have imagined.<sup>1</sup>

"Seediness" held, as he acknowledged, a secondary attraction for him, since he suspected that it might be nearer the "beginning"; and one of his aims on this journey was to travel back to a level "beyond the cerebral". Africa for him entailed a journey into the human race's past; and he comments that he would not have wished to remain at such a level but that "when one sees to what unhappiness, to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebration have brought us, one sometimes has a curiosity to discover if one can from what we have come, to recall at which point we went astray."<sup>2</sup>

Continually, images and experiences in Liberia confirm his sense of travelling back to something familiar and known. Whether via the "wooden-toothed devil" or the tiny

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1 see Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, 1971, p. 165.

2 Graham Greene, Journey Without Maps, 1963, p. 10.

clearing in the forest where man wages his ineffectual fight against nature, he experiences the feeling of being nearer "than one had ever been to the racial source, to satisfying the desire for an instinctive way of life, the sense of release".

The reader is reminded of Marlowe's comparable feeling of kinship with the natives as he travels up river in The Heart of Darkness; and indeed many of Graham Greene's aims in undertaking his journey to Liberia and his findings in its description can usefully be juxtaposed to some of the themes of that work. Conrad's story sharply questions the nature of Western man's "civilizing" mission in Africa, exposing its frequently materialistic base. Graham Greene also forcefully criticizes those who exploit native simplicity in Liberia. He values the presence of Christianity there, initially, simply because it does not exploit and corrupt. More interestingly, Conrad compares native primitivism with Western "civilization", and discloses that both can influence each other with, as in the case of Kurtz, disastrous results. Again Graham Greene searches wistfully in Liberia for "innocence", the point at which we went astray, a truth which may clarify for him the confusion and disarray of Western civilization. Like Conrad, too, his conclusions on the interaction between the primitive and the civilized are often gloomy and far from comforting.



His desire for the instinctual, the free is closely linked to his horror of the disease of consciousness and the will; and his journey back to Africa is, as he affirms, analogous to a retreat to childhood - the lost childhood of which he continually speaks, a return to innocence. His view of adulthood is of a corrupt state where evil is compounded by continual reference back to self. Adulthood is the "fatal trick of transferring emotion, of flashing back enchantingly all day long one's own image ....."<sup>1</sup>; a fallen state close to Iris Murdoch's notion of solipsism. If one had lived long enough, he suggests, perhaps one might "have relearned the way to live without transference, with a lost objectivity"; as it is, perhaps only Africa can point the way.

One of his first images of the continent is of two men walking up and down the shore happy and enjoying the contact of their bodies. He comments:-

"They gave to the blinding day, to the first sight of Africa, a sense of warm and sleepy beauty, of enjoyment divorced from activity and the weariness of willing."<sup>2</sup>

He stresses that their happiness is beyond our com-

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1 Graham Greene, Journey Without Maps, p. 193.

2 *ibid*, p. 26.

prehension; but seems unaware that he may argue for their contentment in the same terms as one would argue for the joy of a pig or a horse - a philosophical absurdity. Later he can hardly be accused of a sentimentalization of Africa and the Africans, since he observes that the "noble savage" appears seldom, the glimpses of beauty are transitory, and eclipsed all too often by sores and disease. Civilization has given little to the African - new diseases in place of old, polluted water and exploitation. Yet there is an occasional visionary gleam of loveliness:-

"though in the very young ..... you seem to see behind the present to something lovely, happy and unenslaved, something like the girl who came up the hill that morning, a piece of bright cloth twisted above her hips, the sunlight falling between the palms on her dark hanging breasts, her great silver anklets, the yellow pot she carried on her head."<sup>1</sup>

The lyrical note of this passage is perhaps unexpected, yet it is present more often than critics suggest. He is not immune to physical or natural beauty - witness the description of Phuong in The Quiet American or some of

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 65.

the descriptions in Brighton Rock - yet too often he sees this as illusory or bewildering to man: Spicer turns from the sea and shore in a kind of bafflement, the girl here is a reminder of what we have lost. But though he is incapable of simple enjoyment, or frequently unable to celebrate wholeheartedly the beauty of the visible universe because of his immersion in the troubled medium of civilization, he can respond to what I can best term a social beauty - the efforts of man to live well with his fellows. In turning to the "old, the unfamiliar, the communal life beyond the clearing" he may be attempting evasive tactics in the face of civilization's pressures, but his pleasure in what he finds there is constructive; it also indicates the ethical cast of his mind. Journey Without Maps often describes wearisome and fruitless treks, corruption, enervation and tedium, but it acknowledges human qualities too.

"..... I never wearied of the villages in which I spent the night: the sense of a small courageous community barely existing above the desert of trees, hemmed in by a sun too fierce to work under and a darkness filled with evil spirits - love was an arm round the neck, a cramped embrace in the smoke, wealth a little pile of palm-nuts, old age sores and leprosy, religion a few stones in the centre of the village where the dead chiefs lay, a grove of trees where the rice birds, like yellow and green canaries built their nests, a man



in a mask with raffia skirts dancing at burials."<sup>1</sup>

He also displays a well developed social conscience when he writes bitterly of the docking of the Africans' pay and of their exploitation at the hands of the rubber companies. This, and his comparable anger at the miserable wages of some Mexicans, reminds one of his historical situation; he did, after all, experience the General Strike and the thirties, and while I should not over-emphasize his stance as a political or socially aware writer, he does betray an acute sense of his own times, and greed and meanness are vices he abhors. While one could not see Pinkie as a psychological study of deprivation, the data of his miserable environment are provided: Graham Greene's eyes are not conveniently closed to guilt and infamy. Indeed Liberia is a saddening experience in view of the iniquitous contrast between white and black, the former all too often existing in a parasitical relationship to the latter. Only at Bolahun is Graham Greene not shamed by the contrast.

"There was something in this corner of a republic said to be a byword for corruption and slavery that at least wasn't commercial. One couldn't put it higher than this: that the little group of priests and nuns had a standard of gentleness and honesty

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1    *ibid*, pp. 86 - 87.

equal to the native standard. Whether what they brought with them in the shape of a crucified God was superior to the local fetish worship had to be the subject of future speculation."<sup>1</sup>

His final feeling for Africa is one of love for her virginity "the innocence ..... the graves not opened yet for gold, the mine not broken with sledges." Virginity, he affirms, is not often come by, hence its loveliness; and Journey Without Maps marks the first stages in his long love affair with the African continent; she has not yet been twisted and degraded in the cause of civilization.

As Graham Greene's purpose here is to record an actual journey, it would be slightly misleading to speak of the function of scene and setting. Yet his experience of Liberia provides an instructive insight into his fiction and displays his tendency to select and slant in order to create an impact. It is apparent that the seedy is embraced for its own sake, for its associations with the primal, for its ability to show life in its starkest terms and thus escape the taint of cerebration. Again, he makes constant reference to the evil which surrounds the human community, to the "devils", to witchcraft: nature is inimical to man - the discomforts of the journey are intense - a sense is created of man squatting temporarily in a place

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<sup>1</sup> Journey Without Maps, p. 90.

not made for him - no bad image for much of Graham Greene's fiction. The images he creates in the book are stark and memorable; one can detect the tendency of his mind to polarization in his portrayal of the villages, for example. Finally, one notes his longing to escape the world of civilization, a nostalgia for an innocent past, our "lost childhood": the present degraded scene is to remind us of that too.

The Lawless Roads describes a journey with quite a different purpose, since Graham Greene was commissioned to report on the state of religious persecution in Mexico in 1938. It thus becomes a religious search for the roots of faith, an attempt to map a world denied spirituality by edict.

His *donnée* meant that he began his travels with certain preconceptions; he went expecting to find bigotry and lapsed faith, a country without light. Though Graham Greene has expressed the view that religious truths are somehow too "hard" for man, he is constantly aware that, whether through the medium of the devils and bush schools of Liberia, the superstitions of the Indians, or the Mass, faith and religion provide man's only hope of escape from the terrible world into which he has been plunged. Thus Mexico for him evoked a presentiment of horror, an apprehension of the worst; and it is not surprising to find The Lawless Roads a very bleak book indeed.



He begins, characteristically, on the border, not as one might expect the border between Mexico and the United States, but on the border between childhood and adolescence, his parents' private quarters and the school on the other side of "the green baize door". Childhood images of distaste, of grimy torments with dividers, of the distant world of his family's peace from which he was damnably excluded, are bitterly evoked, not just because Graham Greene believes these were primary symbols but also because he believes it disclosed to him an eternal religious truth, "Hell lay about them in their infancy". As an inhabitant of the border (an image of himself I suspect he has never surrendered) he learned the allegiances of hate and love and, blessedly, the few moments of relief when he enjoyed the neutrality of no man's land. This experience created in him an awareness of God, "faith was almost great enough to move mountains". And though he claims in his autobiography that he was converted to Catholicism prior to his marriage by a set of intellectual propositions, he continues,

"And so faith came to one - shapelessly, without dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn, something associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way. One began to believe in heaven because one

believed in hell, but for a long while it was only hell one could picture with a certain intimacy - the pitchpine partitions of dormitories where everybody was never quiet at the same time; lavatories without locks ....."<sup>1</sup>

The extremity of these references is marked; unless one allows for a certain posturing, they partake of the hysteria of an unmediated adolescence; and the perversity of the basis of his religious faith is once more apparent. His faith was associated for him ab initio with the worst, the damnable, the damned. Because hell existed, so too must heaven, gradually, "one began to have a dim conception of the appalling mysteries of love moving through a ravaged world", yet it "remained something one associated with misery, violence, evil". The habitual polarization of his vision operates here on the most primary materials; and he continues his prologue to Mexico with images of English suicide, desperation and trivial squalor, creating a montage of associated images of power and guilt. From there, it is a swift step to the martyrdom of Father Pro, the seedy money-changers' booths of Laredo, and the waiting at the actual Mexican/American border. Graham Greene's mind makes a swift intuitive elision between the buildings of his father's school and the hotels of the United States; the world, one feels, in a curious way is one to him - he knows

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, p. 14

what to expect. A strange finality, a shuttered quality limits his vision, though he is prepared at times to admit to "appalling" strangenesses and "amazing endurances", as long as the central apprehension of damnation stands. So powerful is this apprehension that one is, at times, inclined to underestimate the simultaneous presence of his faith, a presence which a novel like The Power and the Glory demonstrates resonantly.

From this initial and primary pessimism, The Lawless Roads never really recovers; the overwhelming impression of the book is of heat, inanition, despair, fruitless treks to distantly glimpsed horizons which fail to materialize, or do so disappointingly, of flies, dirt, disease, of endemic boredom and mistrust, of pointless savagery redeemed only by glances of stoical endurance or innocent goodness - a pitiful attempt to stem the tide of ignorance and evil. Graham Greene portrays a world largely without joy, faith or love; a world of physical hardship which reduces man's stature to that of a stunted dwarf; a world where to find a cooling drink, or to shut the rats from one's room is of the first import. One is strongly reminded of the hostility of India in Forster's novel to goodness and right conduct; but in Mexico the dreadful rigours of the climate (a plateau which freezes by night and scorches by day) are augmented by governmental decree - the priests are hunted, baptism is forbidden, "We die like dogs". In Graham Greene's



eyes, the spiritual perspective which would allow the human sacrifice and suffering some dignity and meaning is the worst deprivation of all, "having no hope, and without God in the world".

Graham Greene condemns the totalitarian government of Mexico, seeing it as a tyrant; and constantly compares unfavourably the actions and attitudes of the priests with their successors, the new schoolmasters - inevitably portrayed as ignorant, lacking in the knowledge of Indian dialect and tongue, and patronizing even where kindly. It is impossible to escape the feeling of bias in the latter delineation; one can accept the absolutism of Mexico because our century provides so many examples in corroboration, but Graham Greene should have met one good teacher at least and more than one greedy and dishonest priest. His account of the frescoes which depict anti-Catholic propaganda are depressingly cogent, however,

"a monk in a cowl flogging a naked woman or interrogating one by torchlight, whip in hand .... There was a little scene of an Indian hut - a dying woman and her husband and a baby or two on the floor and an empty food bowl. The priest was blessing them and the legend said, 'Their capital 50 cents and they must pay one and a half pesos for a Mass.'"<sup>1</sup>

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1 The Lawless Roads, p. 85.

The world of Mexico becomes for him an unnaturally strange and remote one, where the reading of Trollope helps to encourage his sense of orientation, where emptiness and despair suffuse his sense of being alive, where the accounts of the removal of intestinal worms provide him with a grim foretaste of the grave. The physical emptiness (he does after all trek to remote places by mule, seeing few people) insistently mirrors the spiritual vacuity; and there is a profound sense in which his descriptions of places and scenes only superficially mask the eternal verities beneath. The account of Villahermosa provides a good example of this.

His arrival there at night is an excited one; a "great crown outlined in electricity like a casino" promises not only a release from the dreadful Ruiz Cano but also "something sophisticated and gay in the heart of a swamp". This promise did not outlive the night - the mud bank to which they tie up should have been sufficient warning - yet despite his arid hotel room, Graham Greene senses something beautiful. He also experiences a feeling of fulfilment, since this is the godless state where the hunted priest evaded his captors "with no leave train or billet behind the lines": he feels near to the centre of something "if it was only darkness and abandonment". The exact equivalence of the physical and spiritual quest is plain, so too is the analogy Graham Greene makes between the heat and

flies and the spiritual abandonment of its citizens. It is a locale almost forgotten by God, with its "green sour river", its beetles, its heat, its Catholics dying like dogs for want of a priest; a place redeemed only by glimpses of individuals like Dr. Roberto Fitzpatrick, or the wry experience of the dentist, a place into which Graham Greene is terrified of being absorbed when he hears of the "other" Greenes there.

Sunday is an "unnatural" and anonymous day; there are no secret Masses "only a dreadful lethargy as the Catholics died slowly out - without Confession, without the Sacraments, the child unbaptized, and the dying man unshriven."

Physical lethargy and moral and spiritual inertia are one; the empty churches fester like an embedded cattle tick. It is an ugly but exact and familiar metaphor for Graham Greene; the moral and spiritual is made actual by the degradedly concrete; religious truth is appallingly fleshed. He finally concludes that the city of the dead, the cemetery is "a far better and cleaner city than that of the living at the bottom of the hill", for spiritual blight is the worst blight of all.

Yet Graham Greene is not entirely without hope or totally blinkered in his outlook; he does extract a wry



and quixotic humour from many of his encounters and experiences (he meets the original of Mr. Tench on this journey) and he does acknowledge faith when he meets it. Initially, his portrait of some Mexicans' religious observance is unpalatable; girls giggling while performing the Stations of the Cross, rigid and comfortable observance of the most superficial kind in Mexico City. These initial vignettes are superseded by more powerful images, however; Mass in a private house attended by one hundred and fifty and served by a priest with a hideously disfigured face; the intricate ritual of the Indians; a plateau of strange, crooked crosses apparently at the edge of the world. His stringency detects the touch of condescension in the owner of the Mass house, he fears a descent into superstition in the "elaborate mosaic" of the Indians' ritual, yet he allows their faith to stand; he acknowledges the sacrifice of those who crawl up the aisle on their knees, of the peon who stands transfixed in the attitude of Christ on the Cross. Mexico may be damned, but he ultimately decides it is preferable to anonymity:-

"I loathed Mexico - but there were times when it seemed as if there were worse places .... Here were idolatry and oppression, starvation and casual violence, but you lived under the shadow of religion - of God or the Devil. 'Rating for Dating' it wasn't evil, it wasn't anything at all, it was just the drugstore and the Coca-Cola,

the hamburger, the sinless graceless chromium world."<sup>1</sup>

His choice of evils prefigures Fowler's rejection of American ideology in The Quiet American; the spiritual yardstick is essential if man is to enjoy any worth at all; Graham Greene's vision is an obsessional one.

The final image of The Lawless Roads is of the white churches of Chiapas falling slowly into ruin "like faces the world has corrupted waiting through the dry months and the rains for the footsteps, the voice, 'Is it easier to say your sins be forgiven you .....?'" The humanizing metaphor is deliberate, since much of Graham Greene's effort is directed towards the acclimatization of religious truth to man and to the humanizing of dogma. It also closes the spiritual quest and neatly epitomizes the assertions made about scene in this book - namely that the physical mirrors the spiritual, and that it is emblematic of truths which to the author are eternal. It remains now to see if a similar tendency is manifested in his fiction.

The locales of Brighton Rock are like an Ur-Pinter landscape - degraded miserable rooms in decaying houses;

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1    *ibid*, p. 184.

comfortless kitchens with unlit stoves and fetid approaches; bombed sites like dental caries; a prefiguration like the intestinal worms of the corrupt and corrupting grave. Yet Nelson Place - Rose's actual and Pinkie's spiritual home - of the stinking passage "and a staircase matted with old newspapers", of the unlit grate and the mud marks is their bond, the signal to Pinkie of a union which embraces more than Rose's unwitting and guilty knowledge, the seal of their mutual complicity.

"It was Nelson Place and Manor Street which stood there in the servant's bedroom, and for a moment he felt no antagonism but a faint nostalgia. He was aware that she belonged to his life, like a room or a chair. She was something which completed him .... What was most evil in him needed her; it couldn't get along without goodness .... She was good, he'd discovered that, and he was damned; they were made for each other."<sup>1</sup>

For their dreadful origins in dirt and decay have provided them both with a common soil, a "compost" to use a Greene metaphor; yet Rose's maturation, achieved in spite of her original taint, is characterized by something very like goodness and innocence, while Pinkie, in his efforts to escape the cracked window and the "Saturday night exercise",

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1 Graham Greene, Brighton Rock, 1970, p. 155.



has become stunted and deformed, a frenetic refugee from his past. The insistent vision of their author suggests that, as in the fallen world in which they find themselves, their embodiment of good and evil is complementary and interdependent, an assumption which the swift patterning of the novel tends to confirm.

Graham Greene portrays this legacy of pain and terror as well worth escape; it is a territory to be evaded and forgotten. Returning to Nelson Place to bargain for Rose with her parents, Pinkie is appalled, knowing the deformity behind Brighton's immaculate front, "the shabby secret behind the bright corsage, the deformed breast." With formulaic repetitiveness, Graham Greene creates a picture of extreme physical deprivation and unloveliness as potent as any of his images in the two travel books; Paradise Piece can equal any visions of rats tumbling down walls like a waterfall, or dusty turkeys and choked privies.<sup>1</sup>

Yet while his portrayal of this degraded locale is accurate and of its time, his concern is not sociological nor even psychological: Paradise Piece has provided a credible environment for Pinkie, but his author does not wish to stress this genetic point. As one reviewer comments, his characters have hearts not histories.<sup>2</sup> Rather he depicts an appropriate battlefield for his eternal struggle, a symbolic locale whose actual and terrible features serve as a

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1 see for example pp. 173 - 174.

2 anon., "Graham Greene: The Man Within", The Times Literary Supplement, Sept. 17th, 1971, pp. 1101 - 2.

constant reminder of the magnitude of the battle that rages there. It is a poetic and religious apprehension rather than a documentary one. Graham Greene's extreme low-key accuracy and thin style help to conceal this aspect, but Brighton is less the world of empirical fact (though the author always renders this accurately) than the Brighton of spiritual metaphor. His use of setting is analogous to the use made of setting in novels like A Passage to India or The Mandelbaum Gate, where physical features and the delineation become part of the parabolic structure of the fiction.

Pinkie and Rose's escape has been one of limited success and extent; both retreat to other rooms of doubtful glamour, but for whose relative security and comfort they are grateful. Snow's with its "elegance" and paper napkins, its shared bedroom, "a badly foxed steel engraving of Van Tromp's victory, the three black bedsteads, the two mirrors, the single chest of drawers, the pale mauve knots of flowers on the wallpaper" is Rose's retreat. She feels "safer" here than she could ever be "in the squalling summer night outside"; and her sense of this dull little room with its tawdry furnishings as a refuge from a hostile and dangerous universe echoes Graham Greene's portrayal of primitive man in Mexico and Africa, a squatter on a territory which defeats and appals him. It is a peculiarly modern viewpoint, reiterated by Pinter and Doris Lessing, and perhaps finding

its most moving embodiment in the work of Beckett, where the room becomes the last refuge, physical and intellectual, of man in his deplorable condition.

For Pinkie, his room at Frank's is the bastion of his empire, a logical inheritance from Kite along with the protection racket and the razor. The gray pillow and mauve bedspread, the ewer with its scummy water, are home to him; here he lies to concoct his schemes and write his laborious notes: this is his monk's cell where he is at peace. Rose's intrusion into his celibate domain is resented; there is a sense in which he is no longer secluded and "whole" because of his sexual involvement with her - Graham Greene implies that intercourse for Pinkie has signified some loss of virtue, an aspect of the novel to which I shall return later.<sup>1</sup> Her pathetic attempts to order the room after the marriage signify her, to Pinkie, latent hostility and aggression. Pinkie's integrity is destroyed as is the cornerstone of his empire.

"It was her room now, not his: the wardrobe and the washstand shifted, and the bed - of course she hadn't forgotten the bed. It was her Hell now if it was anybody's - he disowned it. He felt driven out, but any change must be for the worse."<sup>2</sup>

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1 see pp. 113 - 115

2 Brighton Rock, p. 265



From this centre his territory radiates out,

"the populous foreshore, a few thousand acres of houses, a narrow peninsula of electrified track running to London, two or three railway stations with their buffets and buns."<sup>1</sup>

Over it and its inhabitants he maintains a precarious hold; he has seldom been out of it, and holds it with uneasy familiarity. Yet beyond its demarcated limits are glimpses of the unknown, the strange, the hostile.

"He stared straight out towards France, an unknown land. At his back beyond the Cosmopolitan, Old Steyne, the Lewes Road, stood the downs, villages, cattle round the dewponds, another unknown land."<sup>2</sup>

Within Pinkie's territory, however, lie other unknown domains, spheres which again he cannot fully control or even visualize and comprehend. There is ample documentation of boarding house room and hotel suite, of foreshore and shooting booth, of pier and parlour. Most of these belong to what might be termed the data of the novel, to the creation of an empirical setting which helps to sustain the thriller genre. As such they require no comment; but certain other

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1    ibid, p. 161

2    ibid, p. 160

aspects of the locale are more interesting.

Pinkie's interview with Colleoni is treated with some detail, and the account of the hotel setting is clear, with its silver thread and gold coins, its improbably named rooms and Victorian opulence. Its richness contrasts firmly with Pinkie's miserable environment, making his pretensions to power appear derisory. Yet Graham Greene is concerned to do more than point a straightforward contrast; for the sumptuous setting is, after all, the context for a gangster and, moreover, a place where "little bitches sniff" at Pinkie and fragile looking blondes ring like tin when struck. The Cosmopolitan is in fact of a piece with Pinkie's background, Prewitt's dismal home, the miserable bungalowville where violence erupts after the races.<sup>1</sup> It is a slightly more tinselled version of the roadhouse where sex is bought and sold, a more comfortable niche for lust and adultery than Nelson Place, but as loveless, Godless and forsaken as Villahermosa or Chiapas. Béatrice Mesnet has noted that the first thing Graham Greene imagined with "any intimacy" was hell, suggesting the symbolic and religious significance of his physical locales as follows:-

"The first thing he imagines with any intimacy is hell; it is the basis of belief in any spiritual world, because only supernatural forces can be

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1 see Brighton Rock, pp. 130 - 131.

held responsible for the unfathomable horror.

And the soul can only have an intuition of heaven when it has been purified by this terrible vision."<sup>1</sup>

So when Pinkie sees Brighton, his vision is informed by that of his creator, deeply suspicious of the tawdry world in which he finds himself abandoned, apprehensive that when things appear to be better they are in fact worse.<sup>2</sup>

By a curious kind of irony, then, Graham Greene raises the doubt that the basest setting is what it appears; Nelson Place, like the worst African village, may not be as damned as the Coca-Cola culture, the disguised hells he so despises. Scobie in The Heart of the Matter loves the colony in which he is based because there human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself.

"Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst: you didn't love a pose, a pretty dress, a sentiment artfully assumed."<sup>3</sup>

1 Béatrice Mesnet, Graham Greene and the Heart of the Matter, 1954, p. 82.

2 see Brighton Rock, p. 173

3 Graham Greene, The Heart of the Matter, 1965, p. 34.



Similarly in Brighton Rock, Graham Greene's effort is to show horror where we least expect, and to question whether horror is where we find it. The priest's very obvious set piece speech at the novel's close questions whether Pinkie is damned, ambiguously opening out the fiction to the "appalling strangeness" of the mercy of God. Graham Greene's treatment of contrasted locales performs the same function; he exposes the tawdry emptiness of the comfortable world of the immediate sensation and gratification of impulse: the act of sex may mean damnation to Rose, but at least, unlike the girl in the car park, it has significance for her.

The use which Graham Greene makes of setting in Brighton Rock is very similar to his treatment of locale in his travel books; scene is symbolic; the degraded is embraced because it may be nearer to religious truth, to the "heart" of things; decay and squalor heighten the apprehension of the spiritual. Reference was also made to the glimpses which he gives of the "unknown" setting in the novel; vestigial flashes of the natural and distant.<sup>1</sup> One purpose here is to heighten his protagonists' sense of divorce from their environment, to underline their realization that here is no abiding city, which is of obvious significance in the religious debate on which Brighton Rock

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<sup>1</sup> see for example Brighton Rock, pp. 103, 170.

is founded. His treatment, however, is also analogous to Muriel Spark's method in The Mandelbaum Gate where, in tiny passages of natural or broadening out description, she achieves the effect of lifting up her narrative, of suggesting by the briefest and barest of implications that nature can provide an earnest of a better world beyond man and his works.<sup>1</sup> Similarly in Brighton Rock, degraded as are all its settings and actors, such tiny grace notes provide a glimpse of hope, a sense that this world may not be all.

The polarization of the issues in the novel, that is, the battle between the easy-going temporal view of Ida and the religious attitude of Pinkie and Rose is much aided by the presentation of its settings; and such an antithesis is often a strong cause of criticism of Graham Greene.<sup>2</sup> But Graham Greene eschews subtlety in the cause of clarity, a sacrifice he, in common with other more obviously didactic writers is happy to make; he feels the necessity to expose the non-religious view as sharply as possible, since to him it robs life of its spiritual dimension and significance.

The Power and the Glory, based as it is on The Lawless Roads, makes a similar use of scene and setting, since to paraphrase the anonymous author of "The Man Within" in The

1 see pp. 213 - 214

2 see for example David Pryce-Jones, Graham Greene, 1963, p. 47; or Derek Traversi, "Graham Greene: The Earlier Novels" in Graham Greene, op. cit., p. 17.

Times Literary Supplement, the locales of his books may change, but the author's imagination is constant. As the parable element in the novel bulks very large, it would be repetitive to treat its setting in detail. But the work displays two valuable qualities; first his ability to render credible and seductive the bizarre and strange, and secondly his power to force us to accept his importation of religious debate into the novel of adventure; and since both of these are to a degree dependent on his rendering of setting, I shall develop some aspects of these twin strengths here.

The novel's beginning is sharply actualized, establishing the faintly absurd character of Mr. Tench and the shabbiness and inanition of the locale frugally but with effect. Single adjectives establish contrasts - the dust is "bleaching", the vultures are "shabby" in their indifference; carrion, sharks, dust, bile and heat abound. The General Obregon (an obvious literary descendant of the Ruiz Cano) extends the impression of decay, of things falling apart in the heat. The reader accepts the scene because it depends on the typical, the stark, the polarized; it also rests on what has been termed by Samuel Hynes Graham Greene's "scrupulously mean" style. No reader could be alienated by the simplicity and obviousness of the language; much more even than the selection of the image which will have impact, the use of familiar language domesticates the distant. It may well be also that it robs it of some of



its exoticism in the process, substituting the cliché for the actual, the type for the individual.

Later when the priest takes refuge in a miserable village, the sharply etched image of its degraded state is presented:-

"Half a dozen huts of mud and wattle stood in a clearing; two were in ruins. A few pigs rooted round, and an old woman carried a burning ember from hut to hut, lighting a little fire on the centre of each floor to fill the hut with smoke and keep mosquitoes away. Women lived in two of the huts, the pigs in another; in the last unruined hut where maize was stored, an old man and a boy and a tribe of rats. The old man stood in the clearing watching the fire being carried round: it flickered through the darkness like a ritual repeated at the same hour for a lifetime. White hair, a white stubbly beard, and hands brown and fragile as last year's leaves, he gave an effect of immense permanence. Living on the edge of subsistence nothing much could ever change him. He had been old for years."<sup>1</sup>

The woman performs the ritual of fire in memory of the reader's atavistic past as well as for functional reasons-

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Greene, The Power and the Glory, 1949, pp. 49 - 50.

ons; and the old man's hands "brown and fragile as last year's leaves" are evoked by means of the most common of images which yet, by its simplicity, achieves a dignified effect. Rats rustle in the leaves as they did in Liberia; the cinematic eye of the author selects, with unerring accuracy, the concrete detail to embody the familiar place on the edge of subsistence. He appeals to common human fears - hunger, rustling rats: the reader, sympathetic to the notion of the hunted, is drawn into the terrible landscape which stirs, subliminally his ancestral past. Simple vocabulary, the barest of syntactical structures, relieved only by a sharply visualized simile, complete the process. An apprehension of the strange, which is yet familiar, is complete.

Graham Greene's descriptions are so pared down, and at a first glance so "objective", that one is tempted to speak of them in terms of a camera. That his eye is highly selective, evoking distasteful images, or only those which will raise pity or irony in the appropriate context is manifest if one contrasts his descriptions with those of Forster in A Passage to India or V. S. Naipaul's in An Area of Darkness. And comparison with the technique of Conrad in The Heart of Darkness or The Secret Agent will clarify his descent, though, of course, I make no link between the relative richnesses and complexities of their styles.

In fact he uses in this novel what Richard Hoggart has called "the selectively typical catalogue"; scenes like the priest's apprehension in his own village, the prison, the plateau of crosses, the hut where the gangster lies are sharp, clear, and work generally by means of the familiar and typical.<sup>1</sup> Hoggart further implies that such a method can be related to the tendency to see life as a pattern, which, certainly, the continuity of Graham Greene's fictional method and preoccupations would support. He praises this technique for its illumination, since the conflict of the novel is frequently crystallized in sharply visualized scenes (the prison scene, the near arrest); but warns that it can also be less than satisfactory, for it can imply a sort of flattery on the part of the author, since he is assuming that both author and reader belong to a mutually determined and agreed world. He further comments that the device evades the solution of conflict, resting instead in the concrete, keenly felt and apprehended scene.

There is much truth in this criticism, but it singles out a simultaneous weakness and strength. For Graham Greene is not interested in conversion by exhortation or argument, but does seize the imagination by the concrete and actual, whose eternal referents he is well able to imply. Complexity, the application of reason to his situations escape him.

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<sup>1</sup> vide ed. Samuel Hynes, Graham Greene, p. 80.



He is a writer who has moved little except in the field of refining his technique. Argument (as an early novel like The Man Within in its use of an internalized elaboration of motive and the springs of conduct shows) is not his forte; while the lowering of language, the excessive dependence on the clichéd, the polarized, can lead to a trivialization of subject matter, which is oddly at issue with Graham Greene's intention - a further indication of the contradictions and paradoxes within this baffling writer.

Initially I observed that The Power and the Glory also demonstrates Graham Greene's extraordinary skill in encouraging us to accept religious debate in the novel of adventure: he does this partly by means of his manipulation of scene and locale. Chapter Three in Part II of the novel provides the most obvious example of this. Here the priest is imprisoned not qua priest but qua suspected drunkard; and the scene with its darkness, its stench, its ugly juxtaposition of quarrelling humans is visualized in purgatorial or hellish terms. To extract the dialogue from it is to be aware how cunningly the author has manoeuvred plot and character to urge his extra-terrestrial meaning. There is talk of the persecution of the priesthood, sin, grace, martyrdom, the qualifications for sainthood, yet the reader never once jibs. Graham Greene holds him because the scene is rendered in its elementals with power, because he has

performed a superb loop in the plot (how can the priest be caught here when the book is only half-way through we wonder?) and because the argument (part of the ongoing "case" of the novel) is pinned to actual character and event. It is "natural" that the priest should reflect on his sin in fathering a child, "natural" that the pious woman should argue for the ordained man of God against the sinner. So theological debate is anchored to the concrete and particular in a way which Bunyan or Spenser would have understood.

The treatment of West Africa in The Heart of the Matter is, however, slightly different and merits some additional space. Indeed, I have previously commented that it is a more naturalistic novel which is less insistent on its religious dimensions. Graham Greene may have suggested that it is about a man in Purgatory with justification; there is debate about Scobie's damnation, but these do not dwarf the essentially non-pretentious narrative of Scobie's downfall, the attention to the trivial and mundane, and his descent into his pitiable vale of tears. This depends partly on the writer's attitude to his locale. I have earlier alluded to his love affair with the African continent, and his affection is surely present in this novel; for there is an attention to the place as it is, without too much effort at underlining its "significance". True, Scobie loves the place because it circumvents man's petty attempts at disguise; and, in typical Greene fashion,

there is a forced contrast between his office which is home, because it is pared down to the bare essentials, and Louise's cluttered, domesticated bungalow, alien alike to Scobie and the African continent. This is reminiscent of the use made of rooms in Brighton Rock; but The Heart of the Matter also differs from that novel. For there, nature was seen as largely alien to man, a slight earnest of a larger world only. But Africa, despite its hostility, to Scobie is familiar and loved; he turns back at a certain hour of the dusk to catch the rose glow of the laterite paths; an expedition with Ali in discomfort and fever means closeness and fellowship. He refuses to contemplate retirement or South Africa; he likes the colony despite its hypocrisies, jealousies and hardships. Africa for him is a loved place among a loved people; it is an attitude which prefigures Fowler's to Vietnam in The Quiet American, and reminds one strongly of Doris Lessing's feeling for the African continent. For the first time in Greenland, it seems man has come home.

The sense of release in the novel, the absence of undue strain is highly beneficial to the fiction. The actual backdrop supports Scobie's tale but does not dictate its limits and dimensions; the demonization of Brighton appears forced and melodramatic by contrast. Haiti in The Comedians is similarly successful, while the leper



colony in A Burnt-Out Case, though a remarkable choice of locale, becomes a little too stark and terminal for comfort; the reader is unhappily aware that it possesses a significance beyond the temporal, and is not always willing to join with Graham Greene in the eternal symbolic quest.

A comparison with his employment of scene and setting in his latest novel, The Honorary Consul suggests that Graham Greene has not lost his skill in selecting a topical locale which enables the reader to focus on larger issues. The plot of this novel centres on an all too familiar phenomenon of the late nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies; namely the kidnapping of a diplomatic hostage to secure the release of political detainees. But while the empirical data of the fiction emphasize that it is set in the Argentine of the early nineteen seventies, the consistent vision of its author ensures that it is also set in Greenland. Ironically, therefore, the diplomatic hostage, Charley Fortnum, has been taken in error for someone else; and, moreover, he is only an "honorary" consul and thus his bargaining power in the larger world is small. His captors are, by definition, muddlers and incompetents; and in place of the "terrible beauty" which might be expected of such a situation, there is tragi-comedy. At a critical stage of the siege late in the book, Doctor Plarr reflects,

"the desperadoes! That is what the papers would call them. A failed poet, an excommunicated priest, a pious woman, a man who weeps. For heaven's sake

let this comedy end in comedy. None of us are suited to tragedy."<sup>1</sup>

The setting in which these characters find themselves is characteristic of their author. He, in fact, gives few details of the physical features of the land itself, but stresses its immense size, thus dwarfing his human protagonists. The main events of the novel take place in the northern province, in or near the "small port on the Paraná", which is portrayed as a place where little of significance could possibly occur. To Sir Henry Belfrage, the British Ambassador, it is "up there".

"He always referred to the northern province as 'up there' as though he wanted to emphasize the vast length of the Paraná river winding its slow way down from those distant frontiers so far from the southern civilization of the Rio de la Plata."<sup>2</sup>

He sees both province and port as remote from civilization and existence as he knows it. It is another Greene locale which has been forgotten by man and, almost, by God.

There is an emphatic contrast made throughout the book between the provinciality and decrepitude of the northern port and the smart life of the capital. Wealthy individuals automatically fly down from the north to Buenos Aires (even

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1 Graham Greene, The Honorary Consul, 1973, p. 293.

2 *ibid*, p. 76.

in the case of the women to the hairdresser) since it provides a place which man has made comfortable for his tastes and appetites. Here in the bustle of business and cocktail parties they can forget the hostility of existence to man. It is to Buenos Aires that Doctor Plarr's mother escapes from her husband's political ideals and commitment to eat away her youth and beauty with cakes and a superficial social round.

But Doctor Plarr has himself made a different choice of evils. He has rejected "the great noisy capital of the republic" with its modernity and haste, selecting instead "the old colonial houses, a crumble of stucco in the street behind the waterfront" of the northern port where he last saw his father. In memory, these have become to him "a symbol of unaccustomed peace".<sup>1</sup> He returns to accept the discomforts of the humid climate and the semi isolation which his background and nature entail. Here he sometimes sees himself as "a watchman waiting for a signal".<sup>2</sup> He thus becomes another Greene inhabitant of the border, since he has rejected one more unacceptable culture and life style in favour of a vague and intermittent readiness to do he does not know what. And, in fact, this apparently unprepossessing setting, which Doctor Plarr yet manages to discern with the eye

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1    ibid, p. 11

2    ibid, p. 13



of love, becomes the place where significant events do occur. It is eventually the centre for a moral and spiritual drama of importance.

The rooms or houses which, to some extent, protect the inhabitants of the port against the vast inhospitable country which surrounds them are again largely familiar Greene territory. Doctor Plarr's room in a ramshackle modern block is "as bare and truthful - almost - as a police station cell."<sup>1</sup> It echoes the monastic austerity of the lieutenant's dwelling in The Power and the Glory, or even Pinkie's room in Brighton Rock. Stripped as it is of relics and disguising inessentials, it reveals its owner's respect for fidelity to "the facts". It also reveals how comfortless such a viewpoint can be.

Doctor Humphries' room is pathetically depressing; and the terms in which it is described disclose that it is the ante-room to death.<sup>2</sup> Charley Fortnum's "camp" is also far from appealing. The sporting prints which hang on its walls underline the incongruity and isolation of their English owner's presence in the Argentine and, by inference, man's uneasy presence in the world. Only whisky, Fortnum's Pride and, eventually, Clara, make this bleak setting bearable.

Doctor Saavedra's uncharacteristically modern flat, while it is ostensibly grim and indicative of a concealed

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1    ibid, p. 176

2    ibid, pp. 19 - 20.

and pitiable poverty, encourages more positive reflections on the part of the reader, however.<sup>1</sup> When Doctor Plarr first sees "the world of Saavedra", he is shocked by its smallness. Its shabby relics of a former more spacious existence reveal how its owner has fallen in the world. His vast cupboard, which contains most of the necessities of life, is

"like an enormous chest in which the possessions of a lifetime had been packed for an impending departure."<sup>2</sup>

The room's bareness and compression do not, however, indicate fear of the emotions as is, I think, the case with Doctor Plarr. It is not a tribute to a negative viewpoint. Doctor Plarr notes that "it could be compared to the inextinguishable hunger of his literary obsession."<sup>3</sup>; and reflects that such an obsession, whatever the quality of Saavedra's books, is not absurd.

Once he has seen the novelist's "womb" of creation, he experiences a new respect for him, despite his manifest absurdities; for the latter is prepared to deny himself in a larger cause. The dignity which he achieves through his

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1 see The Honorary Consul, pp. 201 - 3.

2 *ibid*, p. 202

3 *ibid*, p. 203

self-sacrifice is important to Doctor Plarr and his author. As Father Rivas comments later, "Human dignity matters".<sup>1</sup>

Graham Greene's vision of existence thus transforms an apparently unpromising setting. By a similar shaft of irony, the pleasantest surroundings in the novel appear to be those of the brothel. Although it is by no means luxurious, it has "a pleasant country air".

"An airy patio, about the size of a tennis court was surrounded by small cells. Two open doors faced him when he had taken a seat, and he thought the cells looked gayer, cleaner, and in better taste than Doctor Humphries' bedroom at the Hotel Bolivar."<sup>2</sup>

The individual cells appear to Doctor Plarr to have the atmosphere "of a home rather than of a place of business".

In its unhurried and unpretentious atmosphere, it is infinitely preferable, as the preceding quotation indicates, to Doctor Humphries' dilapidated room. But it is also preferable, in Doctor Plarr's eyes, to the comfort of his mother's bourgeois flat, where the accumulation of possessions

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1    *ibid*, p. 242

2    *ibid*, p. 66.



compensates for the triviality of her life. Possibly he welcomes it because it is a place which fulfils its basic function with orderliness and a lack of hypocrisy. One is reminded of Pinkie's rejection of the "disguised hells" of Brighton Rock.<sup>1</sup>

But unattractive as some of these rooms and settings may be, they still provide a refuge against a hostile climate. Outside them lie the really poor, the inhabitants of the bidonvilles, those individuals whom Father Rivas describes as clinging close to the rivers "as though they plan one day to swim away, but they have no idea how to swim and there is nowhere to swim to for any of them."<sup>2</sup> Their environment is squalid and primitive; it does not permit the luxury of choice or individuality; it allows only the basic fight for survival.

"Diego led the way down a side turning where the mud was even deeper. It had not rained for two days, but in this barrio of the poor the mud lay permanently until the dry season was well advanced. There was nowhere for the water to drain, and yet, as Doctor Plarr knew well, the inhabitants had to walk as much as a mile in order to find a tap which gave

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1 see pp. 88 - 89

2 The Honorary Consul, p. 143

water fit for drinking. The children - he had treated many of them - were big-bellied from protein deficiency."<sup>1</sup>

Graham Greene describes the barrio popular with cruel realism; he also sets most of the crucial events of the novel there. This is the arena for the battle between good and evil, where contending forces fight over that most crucial of issues, a man's life. The battle does not take place in the capital, on the rich men's estates or in bourgeois comfort. It occurs where life is pared down to essentials, where men can see what is fundamental to existence. The comfortless hovel on the edge of subsistence provides a powerful image and focus for the reader. It awakens emotions of pity and terror. He accepts the conflict of values and interests within the hut as a microcosm of existence. He recognizes that such a battle reflects, in Doctor Johnson's phrase, "The real state of sublunary nature". The sharpness and precision with which the issues and setting are rendered enables him to see man and his lot with clarity. He also sees (and this is vital to any understanding of Graham Greene as I have suggested in the examination of characters like Rose in Brighton Rock) that squalor and the fight for survival may not be synonymous with spiritual or moral collapse.

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1    *ibid*, p. 35.

For Father Rivas and his followers do not embrace their terrorist role wantonly. Unlike most of the characters in the novel with a place, however tenuous, in society, they have ideals which they are prepared to put into action. They are also ready, albeit with conflicting emotions, to accept the consequences of such action. They see the magnitude of the issues involved; and, in varying degrees, they view Charley Fortnum as an individual. Their motives are mixed. In the case of Aquino, Graham Greene intimates that he may act out of a mistaken notion of machismo; but he also shows that the man has suffered intolerably at the hands of a brutalizing régime and is attempting to work, however misguidedly, for a better world. By contrast, the other characters outside the hut, with the exception of Doctor Plarr, of course, appear to have little notion of what is involved in the plight of Charley Fortnum, let alone the issues behind it. Even Doctor Saavedra's offer to act as an exchange hostage seems to have been conceived at a remove from life and the actualities of the situation. The novel also shows that it is, ultimately, a sterile gesture.

Finally, only Pablo and Marta escape, for they are, in Charley Fortnum's terms, "poor people" who were merely caught blindly up in larger events. The other guerrillas have fittingly died for their beliefs, which is a last gesture of commitment and seriousness.



John Atkins defines Graham Greene's power as a critic as residing in his "faculty of apprehending the significant symbols", a strength which is clearly dependent on his visual sense and its written embodiment.<sup>1</sup> This examination of the function of scene and setting within his work will, I hope, have highlighted these powers. His concrete and often topical settings seize the imagination of the reader and immerse him in the moral and spiritual dramas which depend upon them. Those dramas also depend significantly on his treatment of his heroes, which I intend to survey in the following section.

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1 John Atkins, Graham Greene, 1970, p. 81

### The Nature of Graham Greene's Heroes

The preceding section spoke of Graham Greene's dark vision of the fallen state of man, which he himself feels came to him early.<sup>1</sup> In The Lost Childhood, he writes of the significance of The Viper of Milan in reinforcing this viewpoint and providing him with his "pattern". He comments on the discovery of human nature as "black and grey", an apt soil for the presence of evil, urging,

"Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey. I read all that in The Viper of Milan and I looked round and I saw that it was so."<sup>2</sup>

Catholicism provided him with a formalized working out of this early intuition, a set of dogma and a scaffolding of belief for an appalled imaginative apprehension - a process which explicates many of his fictional techniques. Graham Greene states:-

"Anyway she had given me my pattern - religion might later explain it to me in other terms, but the pattern was already there - perfect evil

1 see pp. 61 - 63

2 Graham Greene, The Lost Childhood, p. 16

walking the world where perfect good can never walk again, and only the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done."<sup>1</sup>

He thus confirms his fictional nature as an explicator of previously determined viewpoints and as a moralist of a peculiar and slanted kind. For, as I argued previously, Graham Greene concentrates on the "black and grey" of human personality not only because he sees this as a true reflection of existence but also because he believes that evil highlights good. As François Mauriac has commented of his work, by Cain's mark, we know Abel.

But such a polarization takes no account of a further preoccupation of his, namely his absorption with the contradictions and complexities of the moral and spiritual life. He has suggested that an extract from "Bishop Blougram's Apology" would provide a suitable epigraph for all his work. It speaks of an interest in "the honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist", and adds that "We watch while these in equilibrium keep the giddy line midway." This points to his fascination with conflicting values and motives, his sense that those who are beyond the letter of the law may possess redeeming qualities. It also reflects his rôle or stance as spectator, a lonely and detached observer with the "splinter of ice" at his heart.

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1    *ibid*, pp. 16 - 17.



To evoke goodness, then, Graham Greene proceeds by means of the shades of black and grey and a firm perception of what Zabel calls "the dualism of the moral personality". He sees virtue and religion as too hard for suffering man, a view shared by a fellow Catholic, Muriel Spark, and by Iris Murdoch, a liberal humanist, who is also preoccupied by the complexity of moral issues. In his fiction he wishes to underline the point that for man goodness is a hidden state, not a matter of simple obedience to moral law or Christian ethic; and that it is likely to be found where we perhaps do not expect it. In asserting the importance of sin and the sinner, he reminds the reader of much New Testament dogma: the presence of Christ with money-changers, the unclean, since they needed his ministry; the assertion that the "poor" would be the inhabitants of Heaven.

His religious belief tinges even his view of his rôle as an author; for he sees himself as very much analogous to God.<sup>1</sup> It is not with the punitive Old Testament God that he finds a similarity, however, but with the merciful Christ; and his fictions continuously urge the reader not to judge or condemn his characters since there, but for the grace of God, - he goes himself.

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1 see Frank Kermode, "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists", Partisan Review, 1963, vol. 30, pp. 61 - 82.

His general attitude to his characters is removed but feeling; he pities their frailty, while for hypocrisy and the comfortable assumption of personal goodness are reserved his detestation and dislike. Those who have some notion, however fragmentary, of the cosmic drama in which they are involved are close to his temperament; and he admires commitment, the determination to act, since this renders life meaningful, even though the grounds of belief may merit his scorn.

He does not see his characters as necessarily static, as rooted in a particular state or limited by peculiar vice or environment. Indeed those in whom he is particularly interested (and on whom, I think, his approval rests) are portrayed as struggling within a fitful and difficult medium which impels them to change, either internally or by means of action. Pinkie is forced from security of mind and situation by the accidental intervention of forces like Ida and Rose; peace is forever after removed from him, and the novel portrays the fitful see-saw between the small worm of affection for the girl and his more powerful dedication to his purpose. Scobie must struggle to accommodate the suffering of his wife, his scrupulous sense of duty, latterly his pity for his mistress. Fowler in The Quiet American is impelled to action by Pyle's wanton and indiscriminate slaughter. Even Wormold in Our Man in Havana enters the arena, initially by comic entanglement, but later through his feeling for Doctor Hasselbacher.

Much of his fiction, if it does not portray the change of heart familiar in the traditional novel which is rooted in an ameliorative view of existence, illustrates a pilgrim's progress on the part of his protagonists, an awakening to the power and potential of life, a flowering to grace or damnation. His pilgrims are often, as is to be expected of such a writer, perverse or perverted; there is no gradual and ennobling progression to sainthood, rather an awkward stumbling over the rocks of life, with starts and falls which may themselves pre-figure goodness. These figures are invariably typical; the sanctified sinner, the prisoner of conscience, the innocent cipher - from Rose to Phuong, from Pinkie to the ringleader in The Destructors recognizable traits, mannerisms and characteristic forms of behaviour predominate, despite superficial differences. Given his parabolic end and the obsessional cast of his mind, such dependence on types is probably inevitable: fiction is used less to explore experience than to demonstrate it. Certainly one can link it with a similar characteristic on the part of Muriel Spark and Evelyn Waugh, fellow Catholic converts, who also see the data of existence as given.

Less inevitable is the place which sex plays in the parable; for this appears to be peculiar to Graham Greene, a mental and uncorrected squint of some magnitude. Habitually he creates an equivalence between sex and original sin, an equipoise simultaneously dependent on his Jansenist view of life, and his ambivalent attitude to women. From



Brighton Rock onwards where copulation very clearly and starkly equals damnation for the failed priest, Pinkie, to The Comedians where the sexual act is betrayal and the compounding of Brown's culpable withdrawal from the human race, Graham Greene's characters seem to experience a melancholy compulsion to sex from which they derive little apparent sensual enjoyment and no cementing of the bonds of affection and sentiment. Moving spirits in this melancholy coupling are the female characters, often portrayed as Harpy-like figures who batten on masculine virility, as with Ida in Brighton Rock, or portrayed as totally lacking in any moral sense as is Rose Cullen in The Confidential Agent, or described as betrayers of their husbands' bed and board as with Martha in The Comedians. Most happily they are innocents like Rose, or Helen in The Heart of the Matter who yet display a wicked eagerness to mess with damnation, the latter an unknowing and unwitting agent of her man's destruction. The schematic portrayal of the priest's natural daughter and his daughter by affection, Coral in The Power and the Glory highlights the dualism in Graham Greene's thinking on women; they are either innocent or irretrievably tainted; it is as if their physical nature is a legacy which hampers them implacably in the moral debate.

At the root of this central and Puritanical dichotomy is Graham Greene's acceptance of his own sexuality, never one feels an easy or a happy state. He appears to be fascinated

and repelled by women; compelled simultaneously to exalt them as "good" and to abase them as tools of sex: Pinkie recognizes Rose as his opposite, "good", while to Fowler Phuong is "a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest". That is not to say, however, that he cannot display tenderness to their frailty, or amusement at their transparent wiles; a short story like May We Borrow Your Husband? bears ample witness to the former, while Travels With My Aunt celebrates a particular kind of feminine mythology with gusto. Never, though, are the two attitudes harmonized, a curious and disturbing dichotomy which his personal situation and comments do not appear to corroborate. It is as if an unappeased and unreconciled aspect of his experience predominates in the fiction.

I want to turn now to Brighton Rock to test out the truth of some of these assertions. The section on scene and setting in Graham Greene's work suggested that the squalid acted as a magnet for him. So also do sin and the sinner. In Brighton Rock such a fascination is manifest, as is also a contemporaneous desire to respect Pinkie's autonomy and integrity, and to assert the authority of the religious spectrum. These are ambitious aims; and if they are not all fully realized, the novel is still a remarkable achievement.

Pinkie, the gangster, is a failed priest, a mobster

to whom eternal verities are made concrete by pain and fear. At the beginning of the novel he is unmarked, whole; he does not drink or smoke, he abhors women; human affection escapes him; his reality is power, which he realizes by means of cruelty inflicted on others. I have commented in the previous section on his monastic cell, violated latterly by the presence of Rose; and this, along with his perpetual reference back to God (almost like touching wood), the ceremonies and liturgy of the Catholic Church, is one of the constants of his existence, the two providing an unchangeable and immutable backcloth for his temporal shifts and expedients.

His wholeness and inviolability are seen by Graham Greene as a kind of demonic strength, marred only by the razor attack, which initiates the gradual leaking out of his virtue. When he takes refuge from his attackers, Pinkie reflects as follows:-

"And the Boy hated him.<sup>x</sup> He was nameless, faceless, but the Boy hated him, the doll, the pram, the broken rocking horse. The small pricked-out plants irritated him like ignorance. He felt hungry and faint and shaken. He had known pain and fear.

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x the owner of the shed where he is hiding.



"Now, of course, was the time, while darkness drained into the bottom, for him to make his peace. Between the stirrup and the ground there wasn't time: you couldn't break in a moment the habit of thought: habit held you closely while you died...

"But 'Spicer', the Boy's thoughts came inevitably back with a sense of relief, 'they've got Spicer'. It was impossible to repent of something which made him safe. The nosy woman hadn't got a witness now, except for Rose, and he could deal with Rose; and then, when he was thoroughly secure, he could begin to think of making peace, of going home, and his heart weakened with a faint nostalgia for the tiny dark confessional box, the priest's voice, and the people waiting under the statue, before the bright lights burning down in the pink glasses, to be made safe from eternal pain. Eternal pain had not meant much to him: now it meant the slash of razor blades infinitely prolonged."<sup>1</sup>

The typicality of this passage is extreme. Pinkie, like a latterday Greene hero, Fowler, is reduced to the human condition; his neutrality is breached. Inevitably,

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1 Brighton Rock, pp. 132 - 133.

the familiar and inexorable laws of his existence return to his consciousness: he could repent if he so wished and thus be saved; he desires nothing so much as peace, to return home. One is reminded of the Herbert poem, "The Pulley" in which God withholds the blessing of rest alone from man so that restlessness will rock man to His breast; the fever of Pinkie's life will not let him be still. The characteristic equivalence between concrete and abstract is made; the plants irritate Pinkie like "ignorance"; eternal pain is now "the slash of razor blades infinitely prolonged". Graham Greene has managed to make actual theological abstractions, while simultaneously demonstrating the rules of the game as Pinkie plays it.

He marries Rose deliberately knowing his act to be mortal sin; he tempts her to suicide, having embraced murder in passing. His death by means of the acid is symbolic - the flames of Hell "literally" appear to have got him. He is whipped away into zero-nothing. Graham Greene attempts at his death to reduce him to child status, to emphasize his weakness and human confusion, thus suggesting that the "demonic" presentation of the character has been partial; we have been encouraged to accept Pinkie at his own valuation perhaps.

The priest's speech to Rose thickens the ambiguity. Rose, in her misery, desires them both to be damned; in

that way they will enjoy eternal communion. The priest encourages her to hope, depending upon "the .... appalling ..... strangeness of the mercy of God", countering her arguments of Pinkie's witting damnation with "corruptio optimi est pessima". He insists that she must hope and pray, inferring that there must be some good in even Pinkie's love. Rose is elated, and experiences the conviction that she carries life; the novel closes with her approach to Frank's to salvage her record, which will reveal Pinkie's hatred of her, what Graham Greene terms "the worst horror of all".

The movement back and forth of the pattern of sympathy here is complex; the novel's close is dark and mysterious like life itself. Its openendedness draws the reader in. He is simultaneously repelled by Pinkie and appalled at the horror of his end; he speculates whether God could pardon such a creature. The issues which Brighton Rock has thrown up cannot, patently, be simplistically determined or judged. The reader begins to have some notion of the magnitude and complexity of spiritual and moral matters which he has seen made powerfully concrete in the fiction. He has also, to a degree, had his sympathy awakened, which Graham Greene sees as one of his aims as a writer. Subsequent heroes seem to me to be more persuasive guides to pity than Pinkie; but it is something of a triumph to evoke feeling for one who is apparently so far beyond the pale.



But no reading of Brighton Rock would be complete without additional reference to Ida, though Rose, as Pinkie's antithesis is clear. Ida is, apparently, the representative of secular justice, of the natural and human notions of right and wrong, fair play and reparation. In the cause of her concept of retribution she hounds Pinkie and Rose inexorably, becoming an agent of further violence, intimidation and murder. Her compassion is merciless, her optimism well-nigh implacable; at the close of the novel she is content with her achievement; she is like "a figurehead of victory". She reflects that the Board had "saved" Rose; and Graham Greene continues:-

"When you came to think of it, the Board had saved Rose, and a multitude of popular sayings began to pass together into her mind. It was like when the points shift and the signal goes down and the red lamp changes to green and the great engine takes the accustomed rails. It's a strange world, there's more things in heaven and earth .....".<sup>1</sup>

Ida's physicality is frank and cheerful. The description of her that follows is characteristic of Graham Greene's treatment of her, and it is significant in the

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1 Brighton Rock, pp. 306 - 307.

parabolic aspect of the novel.

"She was cheery, she was healthy, she could get a bit lit with the best of them. She liked a good time, her big breasts bore their carnality frankly down the Old Steyne, but you had only to look at her to know that you could rely on her."<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that her author regards her if not with fear than certainly with distaste; she is an emasculating Earth-mother of intimidating powers. She also forms part for him of the army of the benighted, joining ranks with her "friends" who depend on the easy catch phrase, the conventional response, the shallow feeling. Ida is one with those who earn Graham Greene's hatred for their reliance on the here and now, for their attempt to rob human life of metaphysical significance: she is a parallel target to the Coca-Cola culture of The Quiet American, the secularism of the lieutenant in The Power and the Glory and the general detritus of Western civilization. The use which he makes of her physical presence is obviously belittling and derogatory; as one would expect in a novel which partakes of the parable, such detailing is a means of reducing her status in the debate.

That his representation of Ida was conceived at a

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1    *ibid*, p. 96.

subconscious level appears probable; and his sharp apprehension of the, to him, dangerous nature of the forces she represents, encourages him to belittle and caricature in the cause of the ongoing "case" of the novel. This has seemed to many readers to weaken the stature of the book. But the fiction itself examines and discloses the consequences of Ida's "moral" action, the results of what we tend to see as "justice". She thinks no further, initially, than bringing Fred's murderers to task, which appears to be a moral intent. But her motivation is itself suspect. She is guided less by principles of justice than by an implacable desire for retribution, which is itself almost a desire for revenge. Once launched and entangled with Rose, she focuses her desire for retribution on Pinkie, and conceives the subsidiary aim of detaching Rose from his "evil clutches". She ignores Rose's pathetic attempts to defy her, or to protect her husband and thus be faithful to her marriage bond, however it was tied. Ida, in fact, knows best; and she finally congratulates herself, as the passage quoted on page 120 shows, on the triumph of her intentions. Rose, to her, has been "saved".

The novel thus sharply criticizes her unthinking assumption of moral principles. What she has actually helped to achieve is a vicious chain of events which culminates in Pinkie's horrible death and possible damnation and Rose's final "horror". Her author demonstrates that



morality, in her inexorable hands, is a dangerous weapon; and the openendedness of the novel, as I have argued, urges not only Pinkie's right to be seen as a human soul, but the need for pity and charity. Graham Greene thus questions the final authority of moral judgements and underlines the fact that these judgements must themselves be made with perception and foresight. Even then, their consequences may be ominous.

In The Power and the Glory, Greene maintains his fascination with "the dangerous edge of things", choosing to portray a failed "whisky" priest who, alone in the aboriginal calamity of the remote Mexican state, testifies obliquely to Christ. The germ of the novel was a tale told him when in Tabasco of the "last" priest, of whom Doctor Roberto Fitzpatrick comments that he was little loss because of his drunkenness and impotence. Graham Greene's reflection is "but who can judge what terror and hardship and isolation may have excused him in the eyes of God?" And this is indeed what his novel sets out to do, to demonstrate that terror and solitude and misery may provide justification for human weakness to man, when properly examined, and, more importantly, to God. The demonstrable ambition of his end, and the slight form in which he chooses to enshrine it (the novel of flight) are again marked; but here his aim is amply achieved through a precise, considered and disciplined form and a religious intensity of feeling.

Morton Zabel terms The Power and the Glory a religious and metaphysical fable; and it partakes of the best qualities of the fable - tautness, precision, transparency, "claritas"; meaning and form are simultaneously apprehended and appreciated.<sup>1</sup>

Even on an initial reading, when its excitement and intensity are perhaps strongest in impact, the novel has the apparently inevitable rightness of the best art; its dispositions appear as natural and "true" as the pocking of paint in Rembrandt's self portraits. Brighton Rock, with its chase and argument, its brightly perceived cells, and shafts of vision, is lumpy and shapeless by comparison. The movement of the novel, instinct as it is with meaning, is balletic; there is a formal grace in the pattern of flight and capture, flight and death. Graham Greene completes the shapeliness by creating a correspondence of character and significance. Nor is this satisfying wholeness the exercise of technique for abstract pleasure only; for the author manages to use typical figure, ideological opponent, mythical debate in an illuminating religious

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1 ed. Samuel Hynes, Graham Greene, p. 41

exercise of clarity and power. Conviction is secured in this novel by means of its economical shape and definition. We are looking, to paraphrase Malcolm Bradbury on Muriel Spark, at Graham Greene's fingernails; and indeed his method here foreshadows her techniques in novels like The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Memento Mori.<sup>1</sup>

I shall look first at the structure of The Power and the Glory and then at the disposition and nature of its characters to establish its formal and religious excellence.

The structure is not obvious: indeed it would be pedantic to spell out in detail the pattern of the port, the capital, the river, the bystanders in Part I; the return home, the capital, prison, return to the river in Part II. But it runs like a backbone through the novel, and it is instructive for one's own purposes to map this out; for then one sees clearly the starkness and exactitude of the novel, the disposition of its characters into groups. The capital, with its anti-religious forces, stands at the centre, like the hub of a wheel; and it is a huge irony that the priest is forced to return there when the lieutenant begins to beat the villages one by one and take hostages,

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extended treatment of Muriel Spark's spare technique, see either Patricia Stubbs, Muriel Spark, 1973, or Patricia Stubbs, A Comparative Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark, a thesis submitted for the degree of M.Phil. to the University of London, 1969.



an irony reminiscent of a fellow Catholic, Chesterton, who in one of the Father Brown stories, The Broken Cross reveals that you look for a leaf in a forest, a corpse in a massacre. Around this hub are grouped the priest's old home, the banana plantation, the port, the secure border village, all places which provide a potential haven for the priest, though none can be permanent. They also house the bystanders; his former parishioners, the foreigners like Mr. Tench, his daughter by adoption, Coral, the half-caste who betrays him. These are like opposing camps or armies on a dangerous battlefield; and the priest's flight from one to the other in the desperate search for safety is not unlike Mother Courage's incessant tramp from one fruitless expedient to another.

In the examination of Graham Greene's use of scene in this novel, I commented on the superb shaping of the plot, that loop by means of which he places his hero in his enemy's hands in the centre of the novel only to release him to repeated flight and eventual death. The device secures narrative tension and surprise; but its usage goes beyond this. For the dead centre is the prison where the priest encounters something very like Hell and, by reason of his surroundings, begins to explicate some of his views and, in addition, to develop himself. After this experience, he is in some way released; he still runs but in a curious way less determinedly. He has made one of those familiar

Greene bargains with God and feels himself in "a kind of limbo because he wasn't good or bad enough". His death does not mean the end of Christian witness, for the new priest arrives to continue the fight. Thus the novel comes full circle, and completes its sense of pattern, both formal and religious. It also invokes, tacitly, by these means the mysterious action of the grace of God.

Further evidence of the novel's structural excellence is provided by the way in which Graham Greene has patterned and formalized the characters in the novel, "disposed" them as I have previously suggested. To the failed drunken cowardly priest corresponds the scrupulous lieutenant, to his carnal natural daughter is opposed Coral, to figures like Maria and his former parishioners, steeped in physical and spiritual squalor the alert optimism of the German Lutherans. Graham Greene's polarization of vision and his dependence on type figures is rewarded here; for they function formally yet feelingly in a taut pattern which would be destroyed by excessive naturalism or detail. A further pattern lies implicitly within this structure, for some parallel or analogy is made between the life of the whisky priest and the betrayal of Christ. Thus the half-caste is seen, and sees himself, as a Judas; the priest goes up to the capital to die, and there is some use of images of cocks crowing of a somewhat uneasy symbolic significance.

Happily the author does not obtrude such a link; it can surely only be suggestive.

Walter Allen states that the lieutenant in this novel is the first representative of the secular view of life to receive justice at Greene's hands, with a corresponding gain to the novel's stature.<sup>1</sup> He is an efficient, dedicated figure, who attempts to instil some discipline into his demoralized, lethargic troops; a man of honour and commitment and, above all, vision. In his love for the children around him, he experiences a sad "unsatisfiable" affection (the equivalent of the priest's ineffectual feeling for his daughter); it is for them he fights.

"He would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth - a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes - first the Church and then the foreigner and then the politician - even his own chief would one day have to go. He wanted to begin the world again with them, in a desert."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Walter Allen, Tradition and Dream, 1965, p. 228

2 The Power and the Glory, pp. 70 - 71.



In his cell, an equivalent to Pinkie's but characterized by its neatness, its air of being stripped for action, he reflects on his mystical vision of vacancy, "a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all". His apprehension of man's temporality, his insistence on the necessity to improve the here and now since it is all man has, is embraced with the fervour of a religion. Graham Greene detects something of the priest in his "intent observant walk", calling him a "theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again". His detestation of priests is complete; they were deceivers, graspers, worst of all, liars in testifying to what was not true, for the lieutenant's god is Truth, scrupulous, exact, definable - a total opposition to the mysteries of the infinite. Had they really believed, he could not imagine their fear of a little pain, since his rejection of the body is firm; after all "in return for what immensities ....." he speculates. It is perhaps the supreme irony of a deeply ironic novel that the lieutenant as described here is in many ways the stereotype of a priest; dedicated, single-minded, pure, humane. In the fallen universe which Graham Greene sees man as inhabiting, God's witness is a babbling drunkard, a strange and weak opponent for Satan's storm trooper.

His portrait of the lieutenant is sharp, dignified in the sense that he is granted stature and interest, and

not marred by derogatory physical detail (as with Ida), or invested with a curious inverted Satanic glamour (as is Fowler in The Quiet American), which equally has the effect of reducing his significance. But his author is able in this novel to add a further dimension which is psychologically fascinating. Graham Greene states:-

"Something you could almost have called horror moved him when he looked at the white muslin dresses - he remembered the smell of incense in the churches of his boyhood, the candles and the laciness and the self-esteem, the immense demands made from the altar steps by men who didn't know the meaning of sacrifice. The old peasants knelt there before the holy images with their arms held out in the attitude of the cross: tired by the long day's labour in the plantations they squeezed out a further mortification. And the priest came round with the collecting-bag taking their centavos, abusing them for their small comforting sins, and sacrificing nothing at all in return - except a little sexual indulgence."<sup>1</sup>

The feeling which is almost like horror in the lieutenant, and the touches which Graham Greene employs to underline it rest upon observation of an acute and arcane kind which helps to create a convincing character of some subtlety. Such a perception moves in the spirit of James,

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1    *ibid*, pp. 22 - 23.

fleeting as it is. The lieutenant persecutes the thing for which he himself unconsciously longs; he also is an inverted witness. His final conversations with the priest, brief as they are, show him earnestly trying to make sense of existence; his rationalism informs him that one day science will explain mysteries. His attempts at logical reasonable argument, defeated as they are by the paradoxical obliquity of the priest, are portrayed as honest and dogged; Greene even allows the reader to feel the lieutenant's flash of anger at the other's continual evasion. Finally, he acts with mercy, that mercy which he accuses God of lacking; but the priest's death brings no delight, no security: in his dream he hears laughter down a long corridor in which he can find no door.

The metaphysical suggestions which the characterization of the lieutenant and the debate between him and the priest create are numerous; but it is worth stressing that they are suggestions, pinned directly to the scrupulously pruned text and arising naturalistically from character and situation, a feat unachieved by Brighton Rock. Part of the strength of the novel, in fact, lies in the harmony between viewpoint and character; and the debate fails to become schematic because it is rooted in a firm actuality of characterization. Graham Greene does not proselytize; and while perhaps it is a justifiable criticism that the omniscient author does not indicate that the enormous issues debated go beyond the specifically personal, to risk such



statement would be to risk the delicate fabric of the fiction. Moreover it seems to me that by his use of grace, he indicates a norm beyond the immediate and temporal.

Much, by implication, has already been stated of the whisky priest, the paradoxical figure whose movements to martyrdom are erratic and backsliding. His formal opposition to the lieutenant has been indicated (it is not for nothing that neither is particularized by a name; Graham Greene follows much allegorical practice here) and his weakness and inadequacy stressed. His desire to stay on in Tabasco has not originated in lofty motives; his self-knowledge (foreshadowing Scobie's painstaking self-examination) discloses pride and, later, toils from which he cannot escape. Originally, he was a vain, plump creature, encased in the observation of his religion as in a habit, exacting sacrifices whose nature and extent he could not imagine. Indeed he conformed nearly to the lieutenant's stereotype of the priest. Worse, drink and loneliness and despair lead to the begetting of his child and his enmeshment in mortal sin. Yet Graham Greene appears to believe (unlike Iris Murdoch in her portrait of Willy in The Nice and the Good) that suffering, if not ennobling, is at least enlightening; for through hardship and degradation the priest discovers an affection for his fellow sinners which he had not previously experienced. This is what largely lies

behind his sermon, "Heaven is here". He attempts to preach the dignity and value of human life as part of Heaven; just as thirst leads to the pleasure of slaking, or pain the appreciation of health. Heaven becomes for him entirely humanized; and it is perhaps well that his sermon is interrupted at the moment when he is feeling out for the concept of God.

"He said, 'One of the Fathers has told us that joy always depends on pain. Pain is part of joy. We are hungry and then think how we enjoy our food at last. We are thirsty .....' He stopped suddenly, with his eyes glancing away into the shadows, expecting the cruel laugh that never came. He said, 'We deny ourselves so that we can enjoy. You have heard of rich men in the north who eat salted foods, so that they can be thirsty - for what they call the cocktail. Before the marriage, too, there is the long betrothal .....' Again he stopped. He felt his own unworthiness like a weight at the back of the tongue. There was a smell of hot wax from where a candle drooped in the immense nocturnal heat; people shifted on the hard floor in the shadows. The smell of unwashed human beings warred with the wax. He cried out stubbornly in a voice of authority, 'That is why I tell you that heaven is here; this is part of heaven just as pain is a part of

pleasure."<sup>1</sup>

At a later point in the novel he reflects on man made in God's image, and the frequent triviality and meanness of that image. His pity for suffering, his justification of the apparently evil increase, so that he sharply warns the "good" woman against the sin of pride. Correspondingly, his sense of his own damnation is palpable; and it is only at his unheroic end that he realizes the one thing of importance was to be a saint. Graham Greene mutes his death by such devices as his cowardice, and allows one of his terrifying "devout" women to insist on the whisky priest's sainthood, thus blurring the claim. This equivocation is of a piece with the novel's ironic mode.

The whisky priest is a fit opponent for the lieutenant only in the sense that he is an inefficient representative of Truth; yet such a piece of characterization balances the fable effectively. On examination, it is possible to detect inconsistency in the character; could a man of little education frame some of the reflections the priest makes at the plateau of crosses; is his cowardice and former pride compatible with his assumption of duty at the novel's close? The pace of the novel, its shapeliness and immediacy, however, obviate such objections; and critics

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1 The Power and the Glory, pp. 85 - 86.



who demand a higher level of debate ask something of the genre which it cannot afford. Metaphysical debate at an abstract level is hardly possible in a swiftly-moving novel of flight and adventure; it would be illegitimate and cumbersome, which is why I argue that the fiction is fable-like, where clarity, impact and form are crucial. To achieve religious truth by means of such a form is a considerable achievement: perhaps Mr. Greene has not had full credit for that.

The implications which arise from this novel for Graham Greene's treatment of moral values are, I think, clear. While the lieutenant is a respected opponent of the religious viewpoint, his fidelity to "the facts" and social justice leaves even himself unsatisfied. Similarly, his scrupulous obedience to the moral law brings him little delight and no comfort. Perhaps, realistically, the good man, in the sense of the moral man, is also the isolated man. He has little contact with any figures in the book apart from the priest. Humankind cannot bear very much morality; and his rectitude and dedication set him apart.

In contrast, the whisky priest has been guilty, as I have described, of major sins; and Graham Greene does not attempt to claim that these are irrelevant or that they can be set aside. What the fiction reveals is that the priest

is still, at times, capable of nobility and courage; and thus he demonstrates his author's powerful insight into the dualism of man's moral nature. He also shows that for ordinary humanity to be good is a continuous and painful effort. His superbly rendered predicament engenders pity and the suspension of judgement on the part of the reader, who appreciates the irony that this bad man is good, and who realizes that to catalogue his sins may omit his most vital feature, his faith.

The Heart of the Matter is quite a different kind of novel and Scobie a different hero; it harks back to the interior dwelling on motive and scruple of The Man Within or foreshadows the inner debate of first person narratives like The Quiet American or The Comedians. Scobie's pilgrim's progress involves him in a continuous inner monologue, or, at times, the novel would seem to suggest, a dialogue with God. Graham Greene's documentation of his change of heart, while often close to the practice of the traditional novel, and forsaking his usual thriller or adventure genre, is still perverse; for Scobie is in purgatory and descends step by step to self-betrayal and mortal sin. What the novel attempts to argue is the necessity of charity for those in extremis; to raise the doubt that God will damn a creature as tender-hearted as Scobie.

For Scobie's flaw is pity, a tenderness to those who come within his aegis which results in his death, Helen's misery and Louise's<sup>2</sup> alienation; a sense of responsibility

enormous and destructive in its scope. For the first time in the examination of Graham Greene's heroes, though, one is faced with a man of stature; for he is an excellent policeman, scrupulous, painstaking, honourable - disliked, one feels, because the ordinary human sins of envy, pettiness, corruption, fail to find a foothold in his integrity: an unusual Greene hero in that he enjoys his job and, at the novel's start, is in many ways a happy man. But the novel seems to suggest that the human virtues, hard as they are to attain, are little proof against error, and that faults multiply and breed by contagion. It also suggests that man and his puny scaffolding of morals and codes of conduct cannot stand against God, that He determines the dimensions of the argument. In many ways, Scobie seems to be a man hunted by God; Greene writes often in the spirit of Gerard Manley Hopkins, railing against that faith and belief which rules his existence.

It is his wife, Louise, who initiates the avalanche; literary Louise, unable to make friends, unhappy in the colony, desiring escape, a nicer life. Scobie's attitude to her is one of responsible pity; he finds her unattractive, like a piece of meat under a cover in her mosquito net (there are brief hints that he is physically attracted to Africans) but knows that he is partially responsible for this middle-aged creation. Her ridged powder, her tears, her pretensions are ruthlessly categorized, author and pro-



tagonist finding them equally distasteful; yet Scobie, while he does not listen to her complaints, and spends much of his life in evasive tactics or averting argument, from his sense of responsibility attempts to secure her desires.

"He was surprised how quickly she went to sleep; she was like a tired carrier who has slipped his load. She was asleep before he had finished his sentence, clutching one of his fingers like a child, breathing as easily. The load lay beside him now, and he prepared to lift it."<sup>1</sup>

The suicide of Pemberton extends the feeling current of his life; he refuses to accept that God could not have mercy for one so young; and in his dreams, Louise and Pemberton are inextricably confused; it is as if he must be committed to them both. With the advent of the survivors from the torpedoed boat, Scobie's cup is full; in the dying child he sees his own dead daughter, in her agony experiences an overwhelming desire to help her to be at peace. The result is his bargain with God and the destruction of quiet; he also now has no defence against Helen and her pathos: he mistakenly feels he must shoulder all burdens.

Running parallel to this expansion of feeling and responsibility and indeed inextricably confused with it, are Scobie's criminal acts; the destruction of the

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Greene, The Heart of the Matter, p. 44.

Portuguese captain's letter; the bargain with Yusef. Once pity has blasted a breach in his honesty, corruption leaks in; and in the detailing of this insidious loss of virtue lies much of the fascination of the novel. But it is here that the spiritual dimension enters, compounding Scobie's agony. For if he suffers at the loss of his integrity, if he sees very clearly that his criminality and weakness result in Ali's death, his suffering is magnified because he is wittingly in error; he betrays God. There is a curious assumption on his part that in murdering Ali, God's image, he has murdered God; his acts of betrayal and evil have all been committed against his creator.

"The fumes of petrol lay all around in the heavy night and for a moment he saw the body as something very small and dark and a long way away - like a broken piece of the rosary he looked for: a couple of black beads and the image of God coiled at the end of it. Oh God, he thought, I've killed you: you've served me all these years and I've killed you at the end of them. God lay there under the petrol drums and Scobie felt the tears in his mouth, salt in the cracks of his lips. You served me and I did this to you. You were faithful to me, and I wouldn't trust you."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 302.

The rest of the novel (and indeed much of it prior to Ali's murder) removes the narrative to the realms of the spiritual; and it is at Scobie's reflections on God and his damnation that I want to look. I have suggested that the novel is largely a dialogue between Scobie and, his author would have us believe, that aspect of God within him; and, as one would expect of Graham Greene, the tenor of that debate is towards the humanizing of God, the making concrete of the abstract. This leads to somewhat curious reflections on Scobie's part,

When at the Mass, though he has managed by a trick to elude Louise's insistence that he should, sacrilegiously, participate in it, he sees himself excluded from a country which he once knew. He reflects that God has just "escaped" him; and he recognizes the enormity of God's step "to put Himself at the mercy of men who hardly know the meaning of the word". God, he judges, must love "desperately"; and the reflection shames him because of his own inadequate feeling for Him. When he takes the sacrament in mortal sin, he attempts to offer up his own damnation for those he has loved; and he experiences a palpable sense of his own "eternal sentence". Later he apologizes to God for his acts, arguing that He will be "better off" without Scobie. Then, Graham Greene writes,



"No one can speak a monologue for long alone: another voice will always make itself heard: every monologue sooner or later becomes a discussion. So now he couldn't keep the other voice silent: it spoke from the cave of his body: it was as if the sacrament which had lodged there for his damnation gave tongue. You say you love me, and yet you'll do this to me - rob me of you for ever. I made you with love. I've wept your tears."<sup>1</sup>

Scobie's death scene embraces a similar dialectic; and there is, in his confused brain, a sense of someone calling to him, and once more a paralleling of Ali and God. Graham Greene manages all this in a muted and muddled way, as it would appear to Scobie's dying consciousness; but it is most powerful even so.

It is this aspect of the novel which has troubled many readers, who seem to feel that the author is claiming here to speak for God. This is not surely, a reasonable premise, since Graham Greene makes it clear that these reflections occur within the consciousness of Scobie alone. He does not utter them as the omniscient author. The novel's coda also offers alternative readings of Scobie and

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1    *ibid*, p. 316.

his conduct, which open out the fiction and encourage the reader to reflect on the difficult question of Scobie's "goodness" and the authenticity of his reading of events. Did he love no one? Could it be that he loved only God? The novel offers no explicit statement on the subject.

What it does offer, though, even if this is managed in a muted and feeling way, is the reflection that Scobie's pity, while one might assume it to be "good", is possibly illegitimate and certainly ultimately destructive. The events of the novel show that the protagonist's sense of responsibility has had little useful effect; Scobie may be damned, Louise is disillusioned, Helen in despair. He was, in effect, attempting the impossible; to remove suffering from humankind; to arrogate to himself something of God's responsibility. His author is deeply sympathetic both to the character and his endeavour; but I think he also makes it clear that it is God who decides such matters.

Scobie's feeling heart brings him into sharp conflict with the moral standards he had always upheld. He bends or breaks rules from what may be a mistaken notion of charity. Yet Graham Greene does not condemn him for this, though he shows most clearly how expensive such a process can be for Scobie and other people. For there is a sense in the novel in which the fallen Scobie knows more about existence once he has sinned. The novel implies that his moral decline may

run parallel to a spiritual awakening. His acts of wrongdoing awaken him to his culpable betrayal of Christ and His law; and in the latter stages of the book, he has achieved an insight into his religion which is often beyond conventional practice or piety. This awakening may be a spiritual flowering to grace or to damnation; as I have suggested, Graham Greene leaves such an enormous judgement open. What he does do in this novel, however, is to indicate a possible tension between moral and spiritual values, which is an achievement of some magnitude.

Before I close this section on the nature of Graham Green's heroes and the issues which beset them, I should like to bring it up to date by the inclusion of The Honorary Consul, Graham Greene's latest novel.

Initially, however, one has to determine who the "hero" of this novel is; for there are at least three potential candidates whose rival claims merit discussion.

The novel begins with Doctor Plarr, who is a not unfamiliar Greene character in his alienation from life and feeling. He has come to the northemport, as I commented in the previous section, partly as a result of his subconscious feeling for his father. Intermittently, he feels himself to be "like a watchman waiting for a signal".<sup>1</sup>

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1 Graham Greene, The Honorary Consul, p. 13.



Yet he has also left the noisy capital of the Argentine to escape from his mother and her incessant demands for affection; and the novel interestingly discloses the battle within him between a better self, the inheritor of his father's ideals, perhaps, and a cold and amoral self-possession, kin to the mother who thinks only of herself.

Although he has been involved with several women and seduces Clara, the honorary consul's wife, in the course of the novel, love is to him largely a "question of semantics".<sup>1</sup> With detachment, he observes what connotation the rest of the human race put upon the word. He denies to Fortnum that he is cynical about love, merely curious;<sup>2</sup> and in a later conversation with Doctor Saavedra, confesses he wishes he knew "what you and all the others mean by the word."<sup>3</sup>

Doctor Plarr stands largely outside the human race at the beginning of the novel; but, realistically, despite his coldness and his desire to remain aloof from "the fury and the mire of human veins", is from time to time pulled towards his fellow man, and, paradoxically, he ends by giving his life for those who puzzle and perplex him. As a child, he learned to resist the emotional blackmail of his mother; and later he reflects that he might have loved

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1    *ibid*, p. 86

2    *ibid*, p. 86

3    *ibid*, p. 206

his father "all the more because he had never used the word (love) or asked for anything".<sup>1</sup> When Clara, the mistress he has seduced from sexual appetite, speculates that she may "love" him because she wishes to express a different code of sexual behaviour, his self-knowledge tells him love is, for him, "a claim which he wouldn't meet, a responsibility he would refuse to accept, a demand ....."<sup>2</sup>

But Doctor Plarr is not quite as detached as such an insight suggests; for his early love for his father proved him capable of affection. It is this touchstone which helps to involve him with the guerilla band and the "case" of Charley Fortnum; and, ultimately, it is this which increases his stature as a man. His status with the guerilla band is ambiguous. Initially, he has given them occasional help largely because he has not taken them seriously. He is not unsympathetic to their ideals; and they provide him with a possible link with his imprisoned father. Yet he does not approve of the holding of Charley Fortnum; and continually urges them either to let him go or, at the last, to surrender.

His relationship with Fortnum is, as one would expect,

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1    ibid, p. 212

2    ibid, p. 212

a curious one. He cuckolds and betrays him, yet the other looks on him as a friend, while to Doctor Plarr himself, Charley latterly, takes on the guise of his father.<sup>1</sup> Fortnum's age and predicament as a hostage remind Doctor Plarr of his father and his fate; and, forgetting his neutrality, he flies down to Buenos Aires to see what is being done for Charley. His motives do not depend solely upon this identification, however, for he later wonders if he is compelled to try to save the honorary consul because he does not desire Clara to be irrevocably his. In the capital, Sir Henry Belfrage shows him clearly that Charley is nobody's responsibility.<sup>2</sup> He comments at the end of their interview that "Fortnum is such pitiably small beer."<sup>3</sup>

But if others are able to resist the challenge of Charley Fortnum's plight, Doctor Plarr cannot. He is badgered by the guerillas, Clara and Colonel Perez, who all serve to probe the tender wound. He feels himself to be "on the edge of an abyss", where "he could not move one step in either direction without falling deeper into the darkness of involvement or guilt."<sup>4</sup> He knows that he "couldn't stand motionless for ever"; and when Father Rivas confirms his own father's death, he goes to the aid of the guerillas and his patient. In a sense, it is a gratuitous

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1 see The Honorary Consul, p. 207

2 *ibid*, pp. 167 - 8

3 *ibid*, p. 173

4 *ibid*, p. 220



act, since he stands to gain nothing from it; but like many other alienated characters in Graham Greene's fiction, he has become immersed in the troubled medium of life, a baptism he has previously ignored or refused.

His "imprisonment" in life does not last much longer.<sup>1</sup> The final experience in the hut reveals the irony to him that he, the apparent winner, the man who resists feeling, is jealous of the loser, Charley Fortnum, because the latter is capable of love.<sup>2</sup> He leaves to try to talk to Colonel Perez, to "do something for the poor devil in there". His author wisely makes no attempt to explicate his motives; the reader feels he is possibly impelled by a remnant of his father's altruism, a quality Doctor Plarr has shown continuously in his fidelity to his profession. Or has he "come to the end of himself" and is he looking, like his father in his imprisonment, for "a little pain" which will at least make him feel? To Doctor Saavedra, such an end is heroic, and of a piece with Doctor Plarr's noble life. To the reader, it is a fictional shock which encourages reflection.

A more obvious candidate for heroic status in his idealism and commitment is, perhaps, Father León Rivas. As the favoured child of a wealthy lawyer in Paraguay, he

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1 see The Honorary Consul, p. 312

2 *ibid*, p. 288

has yearned to do good and repay the privilege of his childhood, selecting first the profession of an abogado to the poor, then that of a priest, and finally that of a terrorist. When Doctor Plarr sees him again in the barrio popular, he is reminded of the boy with whom he went to school; and throughout the novel, Father Rivas is characterized by a certain physical immaturity and vulnerability which are at odds with the dourness of Aquino, the firm rationality of Doctor Plarr, the wrecked frailty of Charley Fortnum and, most importantly, the harshness of his own purpose.

"León looked as thin and immature in his T-shirt and jeans as the boy he had known in the country across the border. His brown eyes were too big for his face, the large ears set almost at right angles to his skull made him resemble one of the small mongrel dogs which haunted the barrio of the poor. There was the same soft fidelity in the eyes and a vulnerability in the protruding ears. He could have been taken in spite of his age for a shy seminarist."<sup>1</sup>

Father Rivas is as paradoxical a priest as the protagonist in The Power and the Glory; for he has married

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1 *ibid*, p. 35.

Marta after he "lost faith", but later confesses that his separation from the Church is only a separation, it is not a divorce.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in one of his remarkable conversations with Doctor Plarr in the hut, he confesses that he is a man who is condemned to faith; he has no choice but to love the God whom he sees as ugly, and must attempt to explicate His apparently terrible universe. He comments:-

"'So here I sit on the floor of my prison cell  
 ..... and I try to make some sense of things.  
 I am no theologian, I was bottom in most of my  
 classes, but I have always wanted to understand  
 what you call the horror and why I cannot stop  
 loving it. ....Oh, He seems ugly enough I  
 grant you, but then I am ugly too and yet Marta  
 loves me.'<sup>2</sup>

One is reminded of other Greene prisoners of faith like Scobie, or even Pinkie in Brighton Rock.

In the seminary, he states that he had intimations of a gulf between the neat abstractions and arguments of theology and the mystery and horror of life; but in his "honeymoon" period with the Church, these he was able to still. Later his appalled experience among the poor in

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1    ibid, p. 274

2    ibid, p. 283



Paraguay, and his knowledge that the Archbishop sits down to dinner with the General, their oppressor, makes such a feat impossible. He leaves the Church because he is not "patient enough to wait for another John."<sup>1</sup> The life of a guerilla is embraced since it appears to offer more immediate hope for those who suffer the terrible tragedy of existence.

Later he admits that he does not feel hatred for the Church, only "regret". As an institution, she does not fully understand about "the world as it is". She, too, lives in time, and is administered by men whom Father Rivas sees as an inextricable mixture of good and evil, dark and light. Indeed, his hunted life and exile from society have encouraged him to reflections about life which shock Marta and even perplex Doctor Plarr; for Father Rivas can only make sense of the universe if he accepts man made in God's image, an image which is evil as well as good.

He argues that he could not love God if "He were not like me", a being faced with the same temptations and self-contradictions, a creature with a "night-side as well as a day-side". This being he pities for His present evil acts; but, because of his glowing faith in the one good man, Christ, anticipates that God will ultimately evolve into a being who

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1    ibid, p. 128.

is wholly good.

"I believe the time will come when the night-side will wither away, like your communist state, Aquino, and we shall see only the simple daylight of the good God."<sup>1</sup>

Father Rivas himself confesses that perhaps his thoughts may be "turning wild"; but reiterates that this is the only way in which he can believe in the goodness of God.

"God is joined to us in a sort of blood transfusion. His good blood is in our veins, and our tainted blood runs through His. Oh, I know I may be sick or mad. But it is the only way I can believe in the goodness of God."<sup>2</sup>

He celebrates Mass at Marta's insistent request; and as the situation in the hut grows darker, does what he can as a priest and a man for those in this terrible predicament. He attempts to encourage Charley Fortnum to a confession, with some degree of success. His gentle pleas move the other to regret the loss of hope, though this act of contrition appears to stem from charity towards the priest himself. But it also sparks off a reminiscent pity for his previously

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1 The Honorary Consul, p. 285

2 ibid, p. 287

feared and detested father, which appears to the reader as a progression in humanity.

Father Rivas insists that if Charley Fortnum has to die, it should be his task and responsibility. Events, however, remove this cup from him. Doctor Plarr is shot as he courageously leaves the hut to act as an intermediary; Father Rivas goes out to him in case "you might need me". The final act of the drama is blurred; but it reads as if he were attempting to grant Plarr final absolution, which the latter, in memory of a boyhood joke, turns upside down by saying, "Ego te absolvo". Both die at the hands of the troops, though, of course, the novel does not close there.

The connection between many of Father Rivas' reflections on existence and those of his author will, I hope, be plain.<sup>1</sup> But I think one has to be vigilant in the conclusions which are drawn from such a link. Graham Greene is not a novelist who declares his beliefs or opinions explicitly in his fiction, as my comments on the openended nature of the novels studied here will have revealed. And even the qualified optimism of the parable-like The Power and the Glory is not present in this novel. The book does not close, in my view significantly, with the death of Father Rivas, so that a final image of sacrifice might

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<sup>1</sup> see, for example, pp. 149 - 151.



encourage the reader to endorse his life, and, by implication, his views. It ends on a more mundane, but still an important note, which I shall examine shortly.

What his character and rôle in the plot seems to me to reveal is both his author's insight into the human, and hence confused, nature of even figures as desperate as terrorists and guerillas, and also his darkening view of the efficacy of religion in the increasing horror of the contemporary world. I referred in the previous section to the mixed motivation of the guerilla band; and Father Rivas perhaps most aptly focuses their complexity of aim and action for us. He wants the good, pities the weak, the hungry, yet is prepared, in a fallen world, to sacrifice the innocent. He is hunted by faith, yet obsessed by God's evil. Like Suzi Ramdez in The Mandelbaum Gate, he sees existence as an obscure witness to "God's blame"; yet he loves this guilty God. He dies to comfort (in the human and spiritual sense of the word) his friend; but his death, and those other deaths, apparently achieve little tangible result. The novel implies that, in a fallen universe, it is hard to make sense of people and events; and even the religious viewpoint equips one with only a confused understanding. It also suggests that to achieve good ends is difficult; and that ideals may themselves only prove abortive, expensive, or even destructive.

One might perhaps see Father Rivas and Doctor Plarr as complementary heroes, rather like the priest and the

lieutenant in The Power and the Glory. Doctor Plarr, I have argued, is eventually morally awakened. He also efficiently and carefully treats the bodies of the inhabitants of the barrio popular while Father Rivas, in his determination to achieve larger and more difficult aims, is unsuccessful. Then, too, he is not an efficient revolutionary, as even the muddled Charley Fortnum realizes when he asks him why he was made leader of the guerrilla band. His feelings and reactions are too tender to permit the ruthless acts which successful terrorism entails. His fervently-held ideals of social justice are shown to be insufficiently based on the practicalities of life and the realities of power. The reader regrets that the severity of contemporary life did not allow Father Rivas to remain a conventional priest, where he might have offered the comfort and splendour of institutionalized religion to those whose lives are otherwise without hope. Marta certainly feels this.

But the novel is, after all, entitled The Honorary Consul. It centres on Charley Fortnum's horrid predicament; and it is he, not Father Rivas or Doctor Plarr who closes the novel for us. He does, however, appear an unlikely candidate as a hero; for he is a cuckold and a fool, a man who not only unwittingly suffers the betrayal of his ex-prostitute wife, but who also welcomes her lover as his friend and accepts their unborn child as his own.

The frail survivor of an unhappy first marriage and miserable childhood, Charley endures life with the aid of Fortnum's Pride and the catch phrase of "the right measure". He is until almost the end of the book, a pathetic figure, whose loneliness grips the reader's imagination.

Charley Fortnum is not an intelligent or far-seeing man. He takes little part in the ambitious dialectic in the hut, and when he does, does so rather as an individual with the pragmatic and very understandable aim of saving his own life than as the representative of a viewpoint of code. His concerns in life tend to be immediate; a new car; the right measure; a drinking companion. He is a little like everyman. Even his initial feeling for Clara is surely based on a shallow view both of the girl and the nature of love, although, in the course of the novel, his affection for her transforms him from a pathetic clown to an individual with dignity and stature.

He falls in love with her "the first moment I saw her"; and carries her off to his camp, where she is, in Doctor Plarr's imagination "like a bird which had been bought in the market in a makeshift cage and transferred to one at home more roomy and luxurious, equipped with perches and feeding bowls and a swing to play on".<sup>1</sup>

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1 The Honorary Consul, p. 87.



From her own comments, it is clear that she accepts her extraordinary fortune with resignation. She does not really understand her husband; their physical relationship is bewildering to her, but eventually there is Doctor Plarr.

While Charley himself realizes in the midst of his ordeal as a hostage that he does not know his wife well,<sup>1</sup> the advent of her pregnancy summons up all his reserves of tenderness and concern. His clumsy, absurd letter tells Clara that she and the child have given him hope; he wishes to safeguard them both.<sup>2</sup> The "dark side" of God sardonically reveals the truth of her betrayal to him; and his response is, not surprisingly, anger, shock and disgust.

When he returns home after he is freed, he is once more an isolated figure. He does not speak of the baby; he and Clara sleep apart. It is her distress at Doctor Plarr's death that awakens his pity; and he attempts, clumsily and ramblingly, to assure her of Doctor Plarr's love. They speak of a name for the baby; and his depression lifts along with his loneliness as he realizes that "someone he loved would survive".<sup>3</sup> Ironically, he also knows that he and Clara are now closer together than they have ever been.

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1    *ibid*, p. 246

2    *ibid*, p. 255

3    *ibid*, p. 335

Charley Fortnum lacks the certainty of faith or ideology, his beliefs are centred on the personal. In detailing his little growth to dignity through his suffering love, and in closing the novel with his sense of human communion, Graham Greene grants such a position some stature. Indeed, in this last novel, truth to persons, commitment to individuals seems as important as larger concerns. To love and feel for others is a little positive value in a dark world of negativity; but that love must itself be based on a truthful perception of how things are. The man with commitment to the ethics of his profession, the priest/terrorist with his divided loyalty to God and man, those who are faithful to a concept of machismo do not survive in this book. It is fumbling Charley Fortnum, able only to suffer and love, who endures. With that achievement, his author seems to me to experience great sympathy.

CONCLUSION

Graham Greene is a novelist who is fascinated by moral and spiritual dilemmas; and his fiction is largely devoted to disclosing that these are endemic to the human condition. His sharply actualized scenes, his incessant search for contemporary images and settings which will seize the reader's attention, his crisp plots, his quirky protagonists are all directed to this end. Yet so compulsive is the surface of the fictions that the reader accepts the latent direction to the secondary purpose, especially since the author seldom attempts to judge the issues he throws up.

I have argued that his fictions frequently reveal a tension between moral and spiritual views of existence, and that they underline the limitations of the former perspective, since it judges fact, not Truth, and is administered by men who are always subject to the delusiveness of appearance. Throughout his novels, the complexity of man's motives, and the dualism of his moral nature are exposed; while the reader is invited to suspend judgement in the cause of a final accuracy.

But while Graham Greene is profoundly aware that moral judgements, however charitably and intelligently made, are



of a limited efficacy and significance, moral values possess a real and enduring meaning for him. He respects qualities like integrity, truthfulness and the commitment to properly considered ideals; yet his sad insight into frail humanity leads him to show that religion itself may not support conduct, while ideals often prove abortive, illusory or dangerous.

The reader leaves his fiction asking questions about the moral and spiritual; he is awakened from the lethargy of custom. His imagination has been seized by cogently rendered fictional experience; and perhaps his overwhelming impression is one of pity for those, like himself, who are immersed in the troubled medium of existence. Briefly, he has glimpsed and sympathized with that "equivalent centre of self from which the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference". George Eliot held that this was the foundation of the moral life; and Graham Greene here, surely, achieves a moral function. He reminds us of the importance of private and particular experience and encourages sensibility, on which the moral life depends as much as an obedience to rules for conduct.<sup>1</sup> Not least, he awakens the reader to man's potential as a spiritual and ethical being, an awakening as timely as it is welcome, since it comes unaccompanied by dogma. Finally, his scenes and

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1 see Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, 1967, p. 25 for an interesting exploration of the way in which art can aid the moral life.

heroes point implicitly beyond themselves to God, who may be, in Father Rivas' tortured vision, dark and light, but who, nevertheless, Graham Greene insists, is there as final judge and critic.

CHAPTER THREE

MURIEL SPARK



## CHAPTER THREE

MURIEL SPARK<sup>1</sup>

Chapter One suggested that Muriel Spark's treatment of moral values could be considered in two lights; that is, in the majority of her work, she could be linked with Graham Greene in her questioning of the adequacy and finality of the moral viewpoint<sup>2</sup>, while, in her later novels, she could be regarded as a reflector of moral values.<sup>3</sup> Throughout her fiction, Catholicism provides her, like Graham Greene, with a perspective which implicitly "places" human deeds and judgements; and in a novel like Memento Mori, she is less interested in her characters' moral natures (though these are effectively mined for passing satire) than in their souls, whose autonomy she movingly celebrates. In her late fiction, however, her spiritual insights are pushed further back until, in some cases, they are largely external to the novel. Her concern then appears to reside in the reflection of manners somewhat in the fashion of Trollope, with the vital distinction that the world which she portrays is one in which moral values are largely absent.

This Chapter will attempt to chart her change in emphasis; and it begins with a brief examination of Muriel

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1 Parts of this Chapter and the subsequent Chapter on Iris Murdoch are based on A Comparative Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark, a thesis submitted for the degree of M.Phil. to the University of London, 1969.

2 see p. 37

3 see p. 20

Spark's attitude to fiction, which is linked with a study of her first experimental novel, The Comforters. From her early belief that fiction is untruth, she moves to an acceptance of its serious purpose; and in the section Fiction and Truth, Memento Mori and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie are discussed as examples of her new depth.

The next section, Fiction and Piety, looks at The Mandelbaum Gate, which is seen as very much a distinct work within Muriel Spark's fiction, since its concerns are much more immediately personal and pious. Within this section, considerable attention is paid to the demands which the modern world makes upon the individual, and the way in which that world's mode of seeing precludes wholeness.

Finally, the Chapter concludes with a survey of the late novels. Here it attempts to argue that while they may appear different from the earlier work, they are so in degree rather than in kind, since their author's preoccupations are constant, even if her wit and verbal resources appear diminished.

Fiction as Untruth

Muriel Spark's conversion to Catholicism stands squarely at the centre of her fiction; for not only did it mark a watershed in her career as a writer, but it also presented her with a core of belief from which she could later depart. Exactly what form the connection between her writing and her Catholic belief takes is not easy to determine; it is not, for example, a straightforward case of Miss Spark's faith permeating her fiction in a simple way: she is not a Catholic writer as even Graham Greene is. Nowhere in her novels is there a direct dramatization of what she would regard as the facts of her faith, no overt acting out of specifically religious and Catholic dilemmas, as in Mr. Greene's The Power and the Glory. It is as if her personal belief is pushed a stage further back in her fiction, so that it shapes and informs all that passes on the pages of the novels, without relying on direct utterance. This ambiguity, the first of many, is partially responsible for the obscurity of some of her novels, where reverberations and significances are set up quite beyond the surface meaning. I shall have reason to return to this problem later.

Possibly her conversion provided her with a unified way of viewing the random and otherwise meaningless tumult



of life; for she has remarked that her Catholicism "gave me something to work on as a satirist. The Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart".<sup>1</sup> Her acceptance of Catholic dogma thus enabled her to concede that all acts have their places; and that though she was unable to make sense of the muddle, God could and did.

While this norm, or standard of values is so implicit at times as to be almost invisible, it provides a shaping force to direct an otherwise volatile and random talent. It ensures a solid basis for her creative endeavours, and disciplines that element within Muriel Spark which pulls towards disaffection, gratuitous play and an arbitrary grossness towards character and reader alike.

But her personal beliefs are not entirely beneficial to her fiction; for if they encourage her to treat life as a business worthy of serious attention, her commitment to eternal truths by far outweighs her adherence to the significance of her art. Continually in her rare statements on fiction, she stresses that her work is not true, only a version of the truth, something which she herself has created. She cannot place too heavy or definite a dependence on her writing, since it bears only a relation to absolute truth, to the things which really matter. She remarked in an interview with Professor Kermode:-

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Schneider, "A Writer in her Prime: The Fiction of Muriel Spark", Critique, Fall 1962, vol. 5, p. 29

"I don't claim that my novels are truth - I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges. And I keep in my mind specifically that what I am writing is fiction because I am interested in truth - absolute truth - and I don't pretend that what I am writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth - something inventive."<sup>1</sup>

And again:-

"Fiction to me is a kind of parable. You have got to make up your mind it's not true. Some kind of truth emerges from it, but it's not fact."<sup>2</sup>

She perverts Graham Greene's view that the novelist is like God in creating his characters, and compares him instead with Satan, the father of lies; for she sees such creation as temporary and frivolous. God, after creation, maintains with affection and continuous care, but "the novelist is, unlike God, free at the expense of his creatures."<sup>3</sup>

1 Frank Kermode, "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists", p. 80.

2 Nancy Potter, "Muriel Spark: Transformer of the Commonplace", Renascence, Spring 1965, Vol. 17, p. 120.

3 Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", New Statesman, September 1963, vol. 67, p. 397.

That there is a central core of seriousness within the game which she extracts from such an apparently tendentious viewpoint is true; but Miss Spark is far too dextrous and ambiguous an apologist to allow one to determine accurately the size and nature of such a nub. It is characteristic of her that, within her fiction and out of it, she extracts maximum mileage from the paradox that she, a novelist, disbelieves in fiction; that her persona for the writing of fiction is Dougal Douglas, the demonic presence of The Ballad of Peckham Rye. A late novel like The Abbess of Crewe shows how much she will sacrifice for irony, ambiguity and paradox - all important constituents in the search for style or form. In her attitude to fiction, one detects the elegance of a central paradox; and, for Muriel Spark, as the Abbess comments in the novel just cited, paradoxes cannot be solved, they are merely to be lived with.

The acceptance of the fictiveness of fiction has, of course, a respectable pedigree; and it is a useful viewpoint in that it reminds author and reader alike of the distance between the world of external appearance and the created, or willed world of the novel. In partially adopting it, Muriel Spark betrays an awareness, however lightly put, of the problem of authorial omniscience and the relationship between art and truth. I want now to look at the



way in which these ideas are patterned into her first novel, The Comforters.

The absurdity and improbability of The Comforters now seem less obvious than its parabolic commentary on the nature of fiction; almost twenty years of reading "problematic" novels has attuned the reader to its crafty point, while the Spark oeuvre has underlined the initial mannerisms. Frank Kermode early suggested it was about something serious "and the difficulties of saying such things in terms of a convention so absurd and arbitrary as a novel."<sup>1</sup>

The tale has a plot and a sub plot; and its heroine is Caroline Rose, a fervent and tiresome Roman Catholic convert. She is writing a book on the form of the novel, and has suffered a recent nervous breakdown. In her flat, she undergoes an experience to which the novel never offers a satisfactory explanation. She hears a typewriter and a voice which remarks her own thoughts, and which later adds comments of its own. The reader, who can see the shape of the whole book, realizes that Caroline is hearing the novel as it is written; and the plot largely

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", p. 397.

treats of her efforts to come to terms with this process.

"She lay on her divan staring out at the night sky beyond her balcony, too tired to draw the curtains. She was warmed by the knowledge that Laurence was near to hand, wanting to speak to her. She could rely on him to take her side, should there be any difficulty with Helena over her rapid departure from St. Philumena's. On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena.

"Just then she heard the sound of a typewriter. It seemed to come through the wall on her left. It stopped, and was immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts. It said: 'On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena'."<sup>1</sup> *et seq.*

Others whom she tells of this experience treat it as an hallucination, or possibly the work of spirits. Only Caroline eventually knows that she is in a book, and must exert free will in her efforts to prevent her acts from being determined by another.

Her friend, Laurence Manders is a bridge between plot and sub plot; and he is largely instrumental in causing

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1 Muriel Spark, The Comforters, 1961, pp. 41 - 44.

the strands of mystery in the novel to become explicit. He it is who discovers the unlikely fact that his grandmother, Louisa Jepp, is involved with a gang of smugglers, indeed that she is the brains of the organization. He it is who discovers the criminal connection between Louisa and the Baron, a book shop owner who is also a friend of his and Caroline's. Laurence is also responsible for exposing the bigamous union between Mervyn Hogarth, a further member of the gang, and Eleanor, Ernest Mander's dancing partner. Caroline, however, regards Laurence's findings as suspect; for she sees him as the victim of an unscrupulous novelist who is creating a phoney plot. She argues,

"'From my point of view it's clear that you are getting these ideas into your head through the influence of a novelist who is contriving some phoney plot. I can see clearly that your mind is working under the pressure of someone else's necessity, and under the suggestive power of some irresponsible writer you are allowing yourself to become an amateur sleuth in a cheap mystery piece'."<sup>1</sup>

Attempts to blackmail Louisa, and her daughter, Lady Manders, on the part of Georgina Hogg, Laurence's ex-nursery governess and the discarded wife of Hogarth, eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, The Comforters, p. 115.



fail; and the latter unlovely personage, the witch of the tale, is finally drowned, though her body is never recovered. Prior to this, her creator has commented that when Mrs. Hogg stepped into her room, "she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever. God knows where she went in her privacy".<sup>1</sup>

Muriel Spark's topic is the relationship between fiction and life, the connection between the author and his characters, an examination of many of the conventions of fiction. She simultaneously employs the standard structures and resources of fiction and questions their relevance and truthfulness. She uses the manifest absurdities of her novel to expose the weaknesses and evasions of the genre, destroying its credibility by means of her ironic and archly detached tone. Her plot she has constructed on deliberately involved and unlikely lines to contain as many stock fictional situations as she can encompass within a short novel. Thus Caroline's predicament, beset as she is by her apparently imaginary voices, and the unpleasant attentions of characters like Georgina Hogg and the Baron, is the archetypal one of the virtuous and misunderstood heroine. Her origins can be traced back to creations like Richardson's *Clarissa*. At the very close of the novel, indeed as its dénouement, Caroline and Georgina grapple desperately together in the river Medway. Immediately prior to this, Mrs. Hogg has

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1 *ibid*, p. 177

again disappeared, proof positive that she is a fictional character with "no private life whatsoever".<sup>1</sup>

Miss Spark describes this dramatic death struggle in ironic and detached terms, providing it as the stock resolution of her plot - the confrontation of heroine and villain - but indicating her low valuation of such an improbable device.

"Caroline struck her in the face. 'Hold on to my shoulders', she shouted. 'I can swim'. But the woman in her extremity was intent on Caroline's throat. Caroline saw the little boat bobbing away downstream. Then her sight became blocked by one of Mrs. Hogg's great hands clawing across her eyes, the other hand tightening on her throat .....

"The woman clung to Caroline's throat until the last. It was not until Mrs. Hogg opened her mouth finally to the inrush of water that her grip slackened and Caroline was free, her lungs aching for the breath of life. Mrs. Hogg subsided away from her. God knows where she went."<sup>2</sup>

That willing suspension of disbelief which most readers employ when perusing fiction is impossible to maintain with The Comforters, because of the checks which Muriel Spark

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1 Muriel Spark, The Comforters, p. 212

2 *ibid*, p. 225

imposes on her reader. To this end, she exposes her characters as flimsy fictional exempla and allows Caroline Rose to question effectively the apparently meaningful shape which random incidents assume within the novel.<sup>1</sup> The fictional structure thus contains its own critical evaluation; it becomes a novel and its own commentary, which points to a truth external to itself.

The usefulness of dispassionate enquiry into an art form is considerable, even if Miss Spark undertook such an investigation in a spirit of ironical amusement. Frank Kermode suggests that one of her answers is that truth figures in the absurdities and improbabilities of fiction, as it does in life, "and it does so because the imagination, in so far as it is good, is bound by categories which stand in a relation to absolute truth".<sup>2</sup> I am much less assured of the centrality of such an assertion in this first novel, though later Miss Spark enters a period when she is able to accept that fiction can treat with truth. Her point here (and since the novel is a parable, one can speak of its "message" with impunity) is rather that fiction is untruth, appearance, play. The novelist himself is immoral in attempting to determine the acts and dispositions of his characters, and as represented by Miss Spark appears arbitrary, unfeeling and mischievous.

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1 see The Comforters, pp. 115 - 118 or pp. 154 - 155

2 Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", p. 397.



It makes no sense to consider her treatment of morality in this fiction, since by its very nature, it denies that morality can exist in relation to it. But it is worth observing that if she undercuts the status and seriousness of her novel, she is, through craft, manifestly successful at solving a perennial problem of Graham Greene. In his efforts to demonstrate religious truths, he often infers the presence or action of God in the fiction - The Power and the Glory and The End of the Affair are good examples of this - which reduces the credibility and authority of his work for many readers. Muriel Spark by revealing the absurdity, improbability and limited value of her fiction points obliquely to the existence of truths which are not mutable. By a curious and involuted process she directs the reader out to the reality of life and those truths which she regards as eternal. That is not a mean achievement in a first novel.

Robinson, The Ballad of Peckham Rye and The Bachelors to a lesser degree and in more muted fashion repeat and titivate the theme of fiction and truth, with Dougal Douglas, the demon novelist as perhaps the most obvious embodiment of the subject. He as well as noting down people's behaviour, irresponsibly influences it, with bloody and fatal results on one occasion. The novelist maintains her extreme detachment from her characters, uninterested

alike in their morality and immorality, regarding them, one suspects, as a poor lot, material provided for the regulatory exercise of compassion. With Memento Mori, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and to a much lesser extent, The Girls of Slender Means, the pattern changes; and fiction at last is allowed to be meaningful. Miss Spark abandons her early shrill display; religion and truth usefully inform her work, though her meaning is still obscured and her progress tangential.

### Fiction and Truth

In Memento Mori, Muriel Spark restricts her canvas stringently, studying comparatively few characters - her usual practice - but selecting them from the confined group of the aged. She is concerned to note the reactions of old people to the message, "Remember you must die"; and to characterize the foibles and weaknesses of her subjects. Her tone, superbly controlled, is less amused than formerly; and though there is satire in this book, it reaches profounder depths than she has plumbed previously, looking on to the achievement of The Mandelbaum Gate.

Dame Lettie Colston begins the tale; for she is the first recipient of the mysterious phone calls which tell her to remember she must die. The caller, untraceable by any police enquiries, extends his activities in ever-widening circles; and we move from the aged group of Dame Lettie's friends and family, all victims of this macabre hoax, to Miss Jean Taylor and her fellow sufferers in the Maud Long Ward. Miss Taylor had been the personal maid of Charmian, Lettie's sister-in-law for many years. Despite her pain and the humiliations of hospital routine, she has attained a serenity which allows her to counsel others, and to act as a species of chorus to the events of the novel.

The plot which centres around the telephone calls is under-propped by a sub plot of Miss Spark's usual devi-



ousness. This deals with the previous love affairs and relationships of Charmian's circle. Apparent, too, are the ironic twists of fate and improbable links between individuals which the author relishes. In this novel, however, these are mostly disciplined and controlled by Muriel Spark's overriding purpose; and square at the centre of the picture stands the death's head.

No rational solution is offered to the dilemma of the telephone calls. Only two characters put forward any sort of satisfactory answer; these are Inspector Mortimer and Jean Taylor. Both believe that the calls are the work of Death himself and that, far from being a sinister practical joke, they contain sound advice. Few of the characters benefit appreciably, however; Dame Lettie's reaction that flogging should be brought back to punish the offender is fairly typical. Gradually they all die, their author reporting the physical causes and manner of their deaths with objectivity. Last to be mentioned is Jean Taylor who,

"lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidently upon Death, the first of the four last things to be ever remembered."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, Memento Mori, 1959, p. 246.

I have argued that Miss Spark's two previous novels, though dissimilar in setting and control, deploy habitual themes; and in The Ballad of Peckham Rye, which succeeds Memento Mori, she returns to the old idea of the relationship between author and character, and the examination of fiction. Robinson also glanced at the unification of a personality, a theme which preoccupies Miss Spark, and which reaches its fullest embodiment in The Mandelbaum Gate. But in Memento Mori, Muriel Spark has escaped her obsessions, making an imaginative leap into the minds and experience of others. Thus she evades one of her greatest weaknesses, the inability to project beyond self and self obsession. In her extreme interest to feel and to know what goes on inside old people, personal plight and predicament are forgotten.

"Hence she does not see reality as necessarily centred round herself or her kind; she takes the important step away from lived, if embroidered experience into the terrain of perceived or imagined reality."<sup>1</sup>

The subject of old age, which Miss Spark researched carefully, has taken an imaginative hold on her, so that the picture which she presents is artistically and actually true. I cannot agree with the reviewer of Memento Mori who dislikes

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1 Barbara Lucas, "Memento Mori", Twentieth Century, September 1959, vol. 166, p. 214.

the novel because of the author's "conscientious heartlessness", since such a comment is based on a misreading of the work, and a misunderstanding of her fictional endeavours.<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode has directed attention to this facet of Muriel Spark's work, arguing that those who accuse her of lack of charity are wide of the mark:-

"This also misses the point, since the concept /of charity/ cleared of cant, may be entertained in precisely the gratingly unsentimental way in which this pure-languaged writer understands it."<sup>2</sup>

He adds that her remoteness and lack of ordinary compassion in dealing with her characters

"is part of the premise of her fiction; if we feel sorry in the 'wrong way, it is because our emotions are as messy and imprecise as life, part of the muddle she is sorting out."<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Quinton is probably offended by the way in which she catalogues the weaknesses of the old; for her characters display here, as elsewhere, a richly nasty humanness. Their

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1 Anthony Quinton, "Memento Mori", The London Magazine, 1959, vol. 6, p. 85.

2 Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", p. 397.

3 *ibid.* p. 397.



age does not imply that characters like Dame Lettie, Mrs. Pettigrew, or Godfrey Colston have exhausted their capacity for petty spite or crime. Indeed, Miss Spark displays that age, with its attendant difficulties and history of wrong-doing, tends to confirm the sinner in his lies or selfishness. This is realistic, a wry comment on the Traherne quotation from the beginning of the book,

"O what Venerable and Reverend Creatures  
did the Aged seem! Immortal Cherubims!"

The physical discomforts and sufferings of old age are squarely faced and objectively reported in Memento Mori, not through heartlessness, but in a spirit of grave and dispassionate enquiry. Not only does Miss Spark portray the failing limbs, the pain, the less salubrious details; but she also records the sad and confused reactions which accompany them. Thus Godfrey is perpetually obsessed to know which of his friends and relatives still retain their "faculties"; and derives a morbid delight from the obituary notices of those whom he has survived. The moping and mowing of the very elderly occupants of the Maud Long Ward are chronicled rather in the fashion of a sociologist's report.

"A line of cots was being wheeled up the ward and arranged in the new geriatric corner. These cots were much the same as the hospital beds, but with

the startling difference that they had high railed sides like children's cots.

"Granny Valvona crossed herself.

"Next, the patients were wheeled in ..... Being in various advanced states of senility, and also being specially upset by the move, the new arrivals were making more noise and dribbling more from the mouth than usual.

"Sister Lucy came round the grannies' beds, explaining that they would have to be patient with these advanced cases. Knitting needles must not be left lying about near the geriatric corner, in case any of the newcomers should hurt themselves. The patients were not to be alarmed if anything funny should occur. At this point the sister had to call a nurse's attention to one of the new patients, a frail, wizened, but rather pretty little woman, who was trying to climb over the side of her cot. The nurse rushed to settle the old woman back in bed. The patient set up an infant-like wail, yet not entirely that of a child - it was more like that of an old woman copying the cry of an infant."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Muriel Spark, Memento Mori, pp. 127 - 128.

Some of the rewards of age, too, are indicated, chiefly through the reflections of Miss Taylor, who has attained a more peaceful and acquiescent attitude to life.

But the tone of Miss Spark's presentation of old age is important. In the past, and indeed in later books, she has mocked human frailty with satirical zeal, and has jugged her characters to divert her reader. Despite the obvious opportunities which her topic here affords her, her effect is other than satiric and witty. She has been moved and impressed by the plight of the old, automatically recording their faults, but recognizing with sober interest that they stand on the last shore of humanity, facing "Death, Judgement, Hell, and Heaven", some of the eternal truths to which she owes allegiance. A writer who was intent on making callous game of old age could hardly record Charmian's making of her tea so painstakingly, and conveying such a sense of achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, her authorial perspective in Memento Mori enables her to see people, not just as human beings, riddled with error, but as souls whose dignity must be respected. When Granny Trotsky dies, she records,

"In the course of the night Granny Trotsky died as the result of the bursting of a small blood-

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1    *ibid*, pp. 139 - 142.



vessel in her brain, and her spirit returned to God who gave it."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, there is a very delicately adjusted balance in the novel between an objective reporting of the trials and tribulations of age, a satiric enjoyment of human foible, and an ability to view her characters on an eternal spectrum. Appreciation of the hypocrisy and malice of much human behaviour is apparent in the portrait of people like Godfrey Colston, whose weakness for suspenders amuses his author, or in that of Mabel Pettigrew who indulges licence in others as a fruitful source of blackmail. Yet Miss Spark manages to keep this satiric enjoyment in check, laughing at her characters, while soberly allowing their value as eternal beings.

This eternal validity is central to any estimate of the novel; and it separates Memento Mori in kind from The Comforters and Robinson; for whatever the suggestions of a significance beyond their actual temporal events, they were slight works, dealing with characters whose reality was severely limited.

Previously, her themes and stance have been ironic and oblique; but Memento Mori, like The Mandelbaum Gate, is a religious book in the sense that it looks much to eter-

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1    *ibid*, p. 52.

nal truths and values, and is informed with a seriousness which lends it weight.

Miss Taylor, whose consciousness the reader shares through much of the book, is a profoundly religious woman. Her estimate of the situation (though her author never fully realizes the courage of her convictions and grants it her explicit approbation) is accepted by the reader because of this identification. He knows that her view of events is profounder and more valid than that of the other characters. Inspector Mortimer's conclusions, for example, are used merely to support Jean Taylor's. Progressively she becomes less stoical but more able to offer up her suffering to God, since her attitude to life is permeated by her religious belief; and because the reader enters her consciousness so frequently, the experience which filters through it is rendered in a spiritual light. Her function as a species of chorus to many of the events of the novel (many seek her out for advice, consolation and aid) makes her view of events even more cogent.

Her author enhances this tone by sundry comments, such as "her spirit returned to God who gave it", and by her accounts of the last rites, given to sufferers in the Maud Long Ward. These are details; but when they are linked with Miss Spark's ability to regard her characters in an eternal light, they become significant. Her callousness

is not the callousness of a woman who lacks feeling, but whose perspective on life is larger than most. Just as in The Mandelbaum Gate, where all the mess and muddle of life is returned to God's door, so here pity is not enjoined for those who after all are about to stand before their creator.

It is not relevant to state whether I agree with Miss Spark's estimate of the situation; she presents her view with power and resonance, and it is true to the experience of the novel. She has not twisted events to secure this conviction, rather event and character have been nourished by her deep belief.

The authorial perspective gained is vital to her as a writer. Previously, she has produced witty extravagances which lack centre. Her satire has operated without significance. Now she has a centre and scale of values; and in surrendering consciousness of self for the celebration of God, she has evaded her worst faults. Her arbitrary grossness towards her characters, her constant distancing of her subject, her refusal to commit herself are forgotten.



She commented herself that when accompanying her mother to see a number of old people she had known shortly before their death she "was impressed by the power and persistence of the human spirit", seeing "a tragic side to this situation and a comic side as well".<sup>1</sup> The references I have made to her manipulation of tone in the novel, her ability to maintain a dignified equipoise between satiric observation of characters like Mabel Pettigrew and her eternal perspective, bear witness to the clarity of observation and stringent sensibility of the enterprise. To look with this degree of objectivity at one of the most delicate and disturbing of human topics is a feat of some moral toughness, with a moral intent at its back - to record what happens to the old and to provide for the reader a memento mori of some power.

As so often with Miss Spark, moral matters are subsumed within the religious spectrum; but while there is no overt commentary on the ethical, a sharp moral perspective operates which effectively separates sheep from goats.

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1 Muriel Spark, "How I Became a Novelist", John O'London's, December 1st, 1960, p. 683.

Peter Kemp has pointed out that there is a direct relationship between moral blindness or corruption and the inability or refusal to accept the message of the telephone calls. He observes that Mrs. Pettigrew, the most evil character in the novel, simply expunges the message from her consciousness, an appropriate reaction "for, in this work, degrees of refusal to accept the chastening fact and implications of mortality are made to stand in direct proportion to differing degrees of moral corruption".<sup>1</sup>

Yet this does not entail on the author's part, the assumption that the religious view, represented by Miss Taylor, has the monopoly of truth and moral insight. While her view is, as I have argued, endorsed by her employment as chorus and detached and intelligent observer, aware alike of her own frailty and that of others, Inspector Mortimer's view and stance are also respected. He appears to accept the fact of death as part of the cyclical pattern of existence, stoically endorsing the limitations of ill health and old age as part of the human lot. His creator portrays him as a humane and honest figure, open to the enjoyments of retirement and grandchildren, yet willing to take on investigation of life's oddity with alert sense. Thus both the secular and the religious view are allowed moral credence in Memento Mori; and while the latter predominates, authorial fair-mindedness gives both weight.

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1 Peter Kemp, Muriel Spark, 1974, p. 41

Explicit condemnation of Guy Leet, Mabel Pettigrew, Godfrey, is avoided; deft use of dialogue and event achieves self-revelation while the omniscient author evens the moral score by the manipulation of plot. Thus Dame Lettie whose sexual envy and jealousy has encouraged her to try to bundle Charmian into a home, or whose reaction to the death's head was the desire to bring back flogging, dies as the result of a brutal attack, while Jean Taylor's death was peaceful in the cause of magnifying "the Lord".

The reader is not involved in acute and pressing human moral dilemma; however well visualized the characters are, he sees them to a large degree, as parabolic figures who reveal an eternal truth. Satiric game, sociological exactitude, wit, fantasy, piety, are all harnessed to a traditional moral and metaphysical aim; the reminder of man's inevitable corruption, and the necessity to employ his end to inform his beginnings.

If Memento Mori is an artistic shaping of the mess and muddle of life, truer in its formal precision than the random experience it hones, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, like poetry, "excludes all accident", and, like all art, stands in a significant relation to truth. Instead of the central conceit which impels novels like The Public Image or The Abbess of Crewe, it is based on a religious and hence moral apprehension. Fiction was allowed to become truthful



in the case of Memento Mori, since it could represent, with point, the eternal significance of the old. In this novel it can illuminate a temporal act, Sandy Stranger's betrayal, in its complete meaning. Like Graham Greene, Muriel Spark has turned her attention to "the dangerous edge of things" and demonstrates wittily, but movingly, that good and evil are alike complex, and that the human scale is incomplete.

The novel employs familiar Spark techniques; the focusing on the small group or gang, the elastic use of time, the precision and economy of phrase and structure. Gratuitous jokes and the play of irrelevant but amusing conceits are largely eschewed; and the reader is encouraged to piece together the strange experience in a spirit of alert enquiry. Indeed he and the Spark creations are allowed a slightly less frozen warmth than usual; there is a sense in which the author welcomes and esteems both with less detachment.

Miss Brodie is, notoriously, an Edinburgh spinster of advanced ideas who teaches at the Marcia Blaine school. Her method of education could politely be termed progressive; as she regales her girls with details of her love life, the care of the skin, the fascisti, the arguments of those who believe the Bible to be untrue, while maintaining a lofty disdain for the mundane trivialities of more orthodox subjects. It is not surprising that the headmistress awaits

eagerly an opportunity to secure her downfall.

Particularly odious to others is her appropriation of certain girls to form her "set", whom she herself terms the "crème de la crème". These pupils are selected for their various outstanding talents - Sandy's vowel sounds are pure, Eunice can turn somersaults as comic relief; and they are taken to tea with Miss Brodie, the theatre and, most important, into her confidence. But the unique attractions which Miss Brodie's "prime" is lending her cause her to turn her attentions to something more demonic. Mr. Lloyd, the art master, and Mr. Lowther who teaches music both fall in love with her; but the former she renounces since he is married, while she becomes the mistress of the latter in a spirit of intense nobility.

But she cannot surrender her affection for Mr. Lloyd; and conceives a plan which Sandy rightly recognizes to contain a "whiff of sulphur". This is that Rose Stanley, who often models for him, should act as her sexual proxy; and she goes about the scheme with a devious cunning. But it is Sandy who ultimately sleeps with Teddy Lloyd and chooses to betray Miss Brodie. The latter has persuaded a delinquent pupil at the school to go to Spain to fight for Franco. This piece of information, and news of the girl's subsequent death, she accidentally lets drop to Sandy, who links it in her own mind with Miss Brodie's efforts to

prostitute Rose for her own ends. Sandy, recognizing that Miss Brodie thinks she is Providence, decides to put a stop to her; and causes her dismissal and eventual death. To Miss Brodie's complaints of betrayal, and her feeble attempts to discover the traitor, Sandy replies, "If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word betrayed does not apply ....."<sup>1</sup> And it is she who closes the novel for us, clutching the bars of her grille as Sister Helena, answering questions on her treatise, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, and ascribing the influences of her school days to a "Miss Jean Brodie in her prime".

It was Frank Kermode who first used the term "poet-novelist" of Miss Spark;<sup>2</sup> and when one examines The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, one can see how judicious a phrase it is. Unlike the majority of works of fiction which Graham Hough suggests contain "a multiplicity of threads linking the novel to specific external realities",<sup>3</sup> The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie has but a tenuous connection with the world of fact which is of slight importance. It would be misguided to emphasize its social exactitude, or psychological accuracy, though these have a part to play in the book.

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1 Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, 1961, p. 169.

2 Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", p. 398.

3 Graham Hough, An Essay on Criticism, 1966, p. 115.



What is vital is the way in which the mind rests on it as a delightful and pleasing structure in itself, a response which is usually accorded to poetry. Graham Hough has framed a definition of poetry which sums up the quality of this novel with felicity. He states:-

"Prose tends to point to an end beyond itself - to indicate or to describe a state of affairs (real or imagined); to exhort to, to prescribe, or to give instructions for, a course of action.

"Poetry may do these things too. It is idle to deny that it does so, and attempts to make poetry exclusively autotelic, to isolate a 'pure' poetry, always break down against the facts. But though poetry does not deprive the word of transitive significance, the primary aim of poetry is not to use words transitively, but to make a structure of words on which the imagination rests<sup>x</sup>." <sup>1</sup>

Already, reference has been made to the small compass of the novel; but it is short, not as The Public Image, a late book, is short, because she has nothing else to say; but because the space and form is well-chosen, and the matter fits it superbly in the manner of the best poetry. Not for Miss Spark the elaborate detailing of lunch, dinner and tea,

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1    ibid, p. 98.

x    my underlining.

the slow re-working of the individual life of her characters, a faithful account of their thoughts, antecedents and domestic problems. She wants their essence only, a brief account of their chief traits so that they are recognizable. This done, she can dwell on a few outlines - Miss Brodie's betrayal for example - and extract from this event its full resonance. Uncluttered by detail, she is able to manufacture a structure stripped bare of disguising inessentials. This structure in itself is part of her charm as a novelist; for she makes a double appeal, first as a portrayer of character and event which roughly resembles the experience of our own lives, and secondly as a creator of novelistic structures which are pleasing in themselves.

Yet the book still retains an earthiness, a novelistic richness which enable a reader to grant it the normal fictional response, much more so, for example, than was the case with The Comforters. Character is developed by means of dialogue and event in the usual way; different scenes are caught for us, like the one where the girls take their walk through the old parts of Edinburgh, so that we can build up a mental picture of these creatures and their lives as solid and credible.<sup>1</sup> There is also a highly-developed narrative sense; for though the secret of Miss Brodie's betrayal is disclosed early on, there is a compulsion present to encourage the reader to move back and forth in time, in order to elicit the last ounce of meaning for the deed.

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1 Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, pp. 32 - 51.

The structure of the novel has been described as familiar - the small group of characters, the jettisoning of the time clock. These contribute to the harmony of the whole work. The initial act of selection of a small group enables Muriel Spark to scatter the Brodie set at a later date, yet to link their random lives and out-branching characters because of their common genesis. Miss Spark is not a person to deny such a useful link; for she is one who sees correspondences and connections throughout life. The fact that the protagonists are children also contributes functionally to the novel (as the fact that many of the creatures in The Bachelors are bachelors does not), as they thus provide an even greater contrast to Miss Brodie, and meet food for her endeavours. Mr. Lloyd's portrait of them is apt here.

"Teddy Lloyd's passion for Jean Brodie was greatly in evidence in all the portraits he did of the various members of the Brodie set. He did them in a group during one summer term, wearing their panama hats each in a different way, each hat adorning, in a magical transfiguration, a different Jean Brodie under the forms of Rose, Sandy, Jenny, Mary, Monica and Eunice. But mostly it was Rose, because she was instinctively a good model and Teddy Lloyd paid her five shillings a sitting, which Rose found useful, being addicted to the cinema."<sup>1</sup>

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1    *ibid*, pp. 147 - 148.



Towering throughout the book is the portrait of Miss Brodie, absurd, unique Miss Brodie; and if Sandy, Rose and the others appear pale and insignificant by comparison, it is because they are young, and to be formed in her image. Thus by her choice of a particular form, Muriel Spark eludes one of her chief difficulties - that she is unable to delineate more than a few characters in any sort of detail. And her choice of a form enhances her theme, too; for that very largely deals with the efforts of one person to make others like to herself.

"It occurred to Sandy ..... that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's facisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along."<sup>1</sup>

If the selection of the particular group gives the shape of the fictional garment, the use of time in the novel sews in some of its warp. At first reading, this strange, apparently haphazard method is difficult to deal with; one is uncertain what has happened, or where a particular piece of information was gleaned. The beginning of Chapter Two is a good illustration of this. Chapter One has ended with a lesson of Miss Brodie's in which Mary Macgregor has once more acquitted herself stupidly. An account of her death in a hotel fire begins Chapter Two, along with Mary's musings about when the happiest time of

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1    ibid, p. 38.

her life had been. This phrase "the happiest days of her life" leads on to Sandy Stranger, who had the feeling, as a schoolgirl, that her school days were supposed to be termed thus. Then a section of Sandy's experience is described.

In this segment, the jumps in time and space are superficially arbitrary; but a slight examination shows that they partake of a species of logic. They display for us the workings of the writer's mind - she has had Sandy's experience triggered off by Mary's thoughts; she is ranging back and forth in time, and what is more, making this apparent to us. What is present in this novel, as in other of Muriel Spark's works, is a parable based on the experience of the writer in creating fiction - we are encountering her mind as well as its dynamic products. In previous novels, this concern has emerged as an intense self-consciousness, which has led the writer into a mawkish, self-absorption, or a precious attempt to render a very specialized sense of humour. It has been an irritant, and a bar to the achievement of the book. Here it finds a proper resting place; for while we are in contact with the author's mind, in the technical sense, we are not inhibited by this, for she is impersonal. Additionally, this use of time does not hinder the story, rather increases the reader's determination to structure a logical version of the novel's events. He is stimulated into an alert frame of mind, more attentive to what occurs, lest some clue of importance should elude him.

Thus, though in no true sense could Muriel Spark be said to write realistic, mimetic fiction or to involve the reader in judging character, event and motive in the manner so familiar to the traditional novel, by means of this technique she does secure an effective audience for her drama, a public inclined to wrest meaning from the apparently meaningless, readers alert to the ethical connotations of the apparently commonplace.

Equally successful in this novel is its manipulation of tone; serious matters are handled seriously, and sufficient data is given to render comprehensible both Sandy and Miss Brodie's predicament. It is a remarkable achievement to have presented both the danger inherent in a woman like Miss Brodie, and the attraction of her supreme innocence. Thus Sandy's betrayal, seen as necessary, is also regretted; so that we share the double experience of Sandy entirely - we are inside it in a way which Miss Spark seldom achieves. The novel is not tragic, yet it has overtones of tragedy; a sense of regret at waste is apparent, as is also a feeling that events could not have been otherwise. The fun which is enjoyed at Miss Brodie's expense is kept in proportion - she is never gayed, and never becomes a figure of caricature (and here the glimpses of her as a defeated woman which occur throughout the book have some influence). There is a sense in which Miss Spark has come to love her own creation - is able to love it as well as regarding it ironically. Something to which her mind has given body is real, and she presents it as such.



The theme of the novel is a serious one. It is also fresh ground for Miss Spark. Perhaps it contains echoes of her previous obsession with the fable of the novelist, how he arrogates a God-like position to himself in the creation of a fictional universe and people. It renders an account of how one person can assume illegitimate responsibility for the acts and destinies of others. Such spiritual and mental arrogance as Miss Brodie's is an unwarranted assumption of the rights and needs of another. God has engineered the construction of each individual soul, and Miss Brodie has no right, by her acts, to remove from those the qualities which make them individuals, or to determine their course, thus depriving them of the exercise of free will.

Hence Sandy's judicious betrayal,

"She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end."<sup>1</sup>

Fantasy and fascism are amusingly if warringly united in the characterization of Miss Brodie; and it is an achievement of some precision to expose the dangers of such a character and the psychological starvation on which it is based. Evocatively wafting throughout the poem-novel are snatches of "The Lady of Shalott", the representation of

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1    *ibid*, p. 161.

another fatal collision between fantasy and fact. Miss Brodie is, in Miss Spark's economic irony, "sex-bestirred"; yet, in common with the other "legions" of spinsters in Edinburgh of the thirties, she has no proper outlet for her "prime". Her solution is more suicidal than taking to drink, or voyaging in discovery of "social welfare" ; she begins to pattern experience, casting herself in the role of bereaved and romantic heroine, substituting the blandishments of fantasy for the world of perceived fact. The dead fiancé evolves into a creature of legend, while Miss Brodie, in her own mind, becomes the powerful centre of a romantic universe, the sole repository of grace and knowledge.

Sandy Stranger is fascinated by Miss Brodie's "method of making patterns with facts", and torn between admiration "and the pressing need to prove Miss Brodie guilty of misconduct".<sup>1</sup> She later links the tendency with Calvinism, and the novel makes a further equivalence between the Brodie arrogance and élitism, and fascism, which is part of the scrupulous historical background of the book. The author in fact creates an amusing counterpoint between Miss Brodie's pretensions to educate, and the actual imposition of her own far from enlightened views. Her admiration of Hitler<sup>and</sup> Mussolini, is lightly rendered; and her claim to enlightenment, resting as it does in her own charismatic authority, even seems to have persuaded a critic like David Lodge. Peter Kemp suggests, illuminatingly, that her

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1 The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, pp. 93 - 94.

classroom is a microcosm of the extreme political world outside it, so that the apparently superficial comparisons between her and her methods and those of Hitler have a very serious undertow.<sup>1</sup>

The novel is, as I have argued, an implicit moral criticism of the absolutism of ideology and individual arrogance. They are criticized on the grounds of an inexact relationship to experience, the denial of the autonomy and value of others, and, more quirkily, an uneconomic absurdity, an overblown attitudinizing in the face of the facts. But Sandy Stranger's betrayal does not entail the approval of her as a character; and while she is seized by the religious viewpoint (I use the dead metaphor deliberately; her state does not appear to be a quiescent one) she is not the source of value in the novel. Like Graham Greene, Miss Spark believes that to be awakened to religious truth may mean a flowering to grace or a withering to damnation. Her meanness, her unattractive nature indicate that there may be a disjunction between the moral and the spiritual, a divorce uncommented upon by her author.

It is possible that the novel also lightly criticizes fantasy and the human desire to make patterns of existence with the individual at the core of the fable. This divorce between truth and fiction is partially what impels Miss Brodie

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1 Peter Kemp, *op. cit.*, p. 82.



on her primrose path; and while I think that her author is simultaneously and magnetically pulled to the fantasizing process (it is after all the basis of her fictions) she is, as the early commentary on her attitude to fiction showed, suspicious of it. Her implicit and moral evaluation links her, surprisingly, with George Eliot and Iris Murdoch, who both, as liberal humanists, fear the deforming power of fantasy and its effects on human lives. George Eliot acknowledges its claim in Adam Bede; but suggests excessive fantasy encourages a divorce between ideals or broad schemes and the struggling individual. I shall later show that the desire to see the world as one pleases is tantamount, in Iris Murdoch's work, to original sin; and death, misery and destruction are the tragic accompaniments of fantasy. Their emphasis is not equivalent to Doctor Johnson's rational fear of the powers of the imagination; but it does seem to me to point to a tendency deeply engrained in twentieth century fiction (for George Eliot is, as so often, a precursor) namely the fear that fiction is not itself moral by virtue of its "escapist" fictiveness, and that what is currently needed is a firmly moral base. The dismissal of absolutes, as in Lawrence's case, leads to an insistence on the "morality" of the individual work, a claim which Muriel Spark, who is in many ways a most representative figure, worries at.

Yet even if I argue for this novel a moral impact and suggest that The Girls of Slender Means, its successor,

is a moral fable where the moral and metaphysical significance of an act is shown to have spiritual repercussions, I am aware of the ambiguity within these works, of a pull contrary to the serious. Criticism of them reveals contradictory interpretations;<sup>1</sup> and while one recognizes that Miss Spark's efforts are often directed towards anti-syzygy, or the balancing of opposites, it must be admitted that true and final solutions can be wilfully avoided.<sup>2</sup>

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie can be excepted from such criticism; and indeed succeeds in rendering the religious view because that emerges naturally from character and event. The reader watches the creation of Sandy Stranger's faith, ironically founded on a wrong act - betrayal -; and sees it is rooted in some psychological insight and acumen. To it is opposed Miss Brodie's Calvinism; the "suicidal" election to grace; and Muriel Spark is able to criticize such a code because concrete events demonstrate its dangers. Her rejection of the too human desire to pattern and order life for others convinces by the odour of decay which ultimately emerges from Miss Brodie. Part of her success hinges on the credibility of her characterization; and partially, the novel can make a moral statement - of some simplicity maybe - because she has not denied herself a vocabulary of moral concepts; she does not undercut the ethical order. Acts are clearly ordered and estimated on a scale of some

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1 see for example Francis Hope, "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie", Encounter, December 1961, vol. 17, p. 78 or Kermode op. cit., p. 398.

2 see Alan Kennedy, The Protean Self, 1974, p. 152

toughness; truth matters, the freedom to act properly, fidelity, innocence. Miss Spark emerges in a surprisingly old-fashioned and clear-sighted light. The Girls of Slender Means, however, does not achieve a comparable impact, for there its central act of "savagery" is muted by the unbalancing presence of the contingent; R.A.F. slang, unmediated by the author, overtopples the serious idea behind the novel. There is a perversity within her which refuses to reconcile, to judge, to solve: her short story Come Along, Marjorie provides an effective symbol of her mental situation; two characters' neuroses take the contradictory forms of seeing every person as the same, or perceiving each individual as unique. "We are all the same, she would assert, infuriating me because I knew God had made everyone unique". The author allows the paradox to stand.

### Fiction and Piety

An early reviewer of The Mandelbaum Gate reflected on its "piety", and noted its removed stance from the mannered Spark canon. Later works have done little to soften its apartness; in my view it marks a personal watershed for



Miss Spark in her efforts to come to terms with and seriously embody private experience, and also a fictional peak in that she attempts a fuller, more naturalistic and conventional novel. This implies a further loosening in her view of fiction; and while she apparently regresses to her norm in later works, this novel is allowed both to reconcile the psychologically split, to suggest amity between warring factions in divided Jerusalem, and to hint at something beyond. The absurd and stylized world of The Comforters is left far behind.

The plot, as usual, is involved, and further complicated by the use of the time-shift device. Its story centres on the visit of Barbara Vaughan to the Holy Land; her sojourn there serves a double purpose, for she combines a devotional pilgrimage with a projected meeting with her fiancé, Harry Clegg. Barbara is in a state of personal crisis, inspired by her problematical marriage; and her destiny becomes interwoven with that of Freddy Hamilton, a diplomat, who has submerged his true self in the interests of his family and his profession. A sub-plot of great intricacy confuses their story (influenced largely, I suspect, by the spy stories of Graham Greene); but eventually Barbara completes her pilgrimage, while Freddy, in more tragic circumstances, is freed from the nagging rule of a sense of "impersonal guilt".

The themes of The Mandelbaum Gate are complex because, for the most part, they are not easily apprehended in overt,

author-directed statements but rather embedded in the fabric of events and the characterization of the novel. Indeed, even in this, her most successful novel, Muriel Spark has yet employed a parabolic structure and ambiguity of treatment which hinder a full realization of the book's topic. Thus while the novel's themes will be extrapolated for the purposes of discussion, certain of these are less sure and finalized than this analysis may suggest. This novel is still marred by Miss Spark's intermittent refusal to apply reason to her fictional situations, her propensity to dwell on the absurd and ironic for their own sake.

The setting of The Mandelbaum Gate is the world of external reality in which social custom and expectation play a considerable part. This world is portrayed by Muriel Spark as confused and contradictory, a world which Frank Kermode has properly defined by means of the phrase, "wild muddle".<sup>1</sup> The novel's subject is concerned with the strains imposed on individual characters by the random nature of the world which encompasses them; and it details their attempts, as structuring beings, to make sense of an existence which is otherwise apparently formless. These efforts are, for the most part, ludicrous and inadequate; and only Barbara Vaughan, the book's Catholic heroine, succeeds in uniting the disparate strands of her existence. Her solution to the problem of life and living is a specifically religious one.

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1 Frank Kermode, Continuities, 1968, p. 209.

The world of The Mandelbaum Gate is confused and random; and here it is no accident that Jerusalem, the Holy City, with its racial, cultural and religious comminglings and divisions is the novel's locale. One impression which the book creates most strongly is of the jostling of various races in busy, crowded streets, of a variety of costumes, customs and languages. The characters are Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Israeli, English, Jordanian; and they move from one geographical state to another by means of passports and customs barriers. Thus Muriel Spark has discovered for herself a ready-made setting whose function is parabolic; and which can symbolize microcosmically the dissension and disharmony which she sees as a true representation of the world of external fact.

Over against this muddled external world with its frightening multiplicity of facets and demands, she sets the lonely, self-contained individual, familiar now from his habitual presence in her fiction. In general, his one resource in coping with a bewildering array of different experience is shown to reside in the human tendency to simplify, to group events and people into categories, to imagine that the individual can be defined by his social rôle. To make life tolerable in any way, he is shown as denying the uniqueness of a person or an experience, or even an object, in the interests of proving that certain trends are apparent in existence. Thus the bewildering



array of labels and labelling in this book, which tend to be "Jew", "Roman Catholic", "spinster", "Arab", "British", "intellectual"; and though one would imagine that the process of labelling, of definition is in itself a unification, or a synthesis, the tenor of the novel is that the effect is instead divisive, corrupt, tending to destroy.

The ambiguous person of Barbara Vaughan focuses much of this argument; for she is, paradoxically, a Gentile Jew (of Jewish mother and Gentile father) who has been converted to Roman Catholicism. Thus it is that she seems to belong under at least three headings simultaneously; she is a Jew by birth, a Gentile by birth and a Roman Catholic by belief; but she herself is of course, one person, uniting all these disparate facts, however unpalatable the effect of this strange combination is shown to be to the committed characters in the novel. Thus, early in her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, her Jewish guide attempts to "place" her; to discover which label he can justifiably pin on her; to understand her in relation to the previous configurations of his thought and experience.

" 'A half-Jew?'

'Yes.'

'Which half?'

'Through my mother.'

'Then you are a whole Jew. The Jew inherits through the mother by Jewish Law.'

'I know that. But one says half-Jew to mean

that one of the parents is a Gentile and the other -..!'

'But the Jew inherits through the mother. You are then a full Jew by the Law.'

'Yes, but not according to the Gentile parent's Law.'

'What was your father's Law?'

That was a question indeed. "1

Attempts at definitions proliferate in the novel; Abdul, Freddy's Arabic teacher, places him by means of the "System":

"Hamilton more or less belonged, in Abdul's view, to that total category of the human race known to Abdul and his companions as the System. It included their fathers, the Pope, President Nasser, King Hussein, Mr. Ben-Gurion, the Grand Mufti, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the English Sovereign, the civil servants and upper militia throughout the world, and all the other representatives of the police forces of life who, however beneficent, had absent-mindedly put his generation as a whole in difficulties."2

An obvious simplification which he is quite content to employ.

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1 Muriel Spark, The Mandelbaum Gate, 1965, pp. 22 - 23.

2 *ibid*, p. 82.

A second theme, the attempts of individuals in the novel to achieve self-knowledge, and to assert their own uniqueness is closely linked with the material which has gone before. One could see it as called into being by the nature of the initial theme; because the world of experience is so inimical to the characters, they are inevitably cast back upon themselves, forced to rely on and attune their own resources, since by means of them, almost exclusively, they will cope with their hostile environment. Then, too, because those whom they meet inevitably fail to regard them as individuals, they experience a profound need to assert their difference, their sense of their own identity.

Barbara Vaughan's personality and history are most relevant here. For she clearly has the difficult task of integrating disparate strands in her life, and, fundamentally, in herself; she has had to live in the world of the Vaughans - of cucumber sandwiches, tea and tennis - and of her Jewish relatives at Golders Green, with their talk of the Passover and the poor bread which their fathers ate in Egypt. Nor would she allow either side to forget the existence of her other blood; she cannot, as it is a fact of her being, yet one senses the strain that all this imposes. She urgently requires to proclaim that she herself is unique; unable perhaps to decide for herself into which compartment she should fall, she needs to consider herself as just herself, more than the sum of her parts; a creative entity perhaps.



"At Joppa, then, when Barbara came to be leaning over the sea-wall, she said to Saul Ephraim, who reminded her much of the Aaronson cousins of her youth: 'My Gentile relations tried too hard to forget I was a half-Jew. My Jewish relations couldn't forget I was a half-Gentile. Actually, I didn't let them forget, either way.'

'Quite right. Why should you forget what you are?' said Saul. 'You were right.'

'I know that. But one doesn't altogether know what one is. There's always more to it than Jew, Gentile, half-Jew, half-Gentile. There's the human soul, the individual. Not "Jew, Gentile" as one might say "autumn, winter". Something unique and unrepeatable.'"<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Sybille Bedford has seen the major theme of the novel as liberation and identity, liberation from an identity, thus summing up both Barbara's and Freddy Hamilton's experience.

"Flight, release from the accretions of a conforming life, temporary expansion into a rediscovered, more potent, carefree - careless? - self."<sup>2</sup>

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1    *ibid.*, p. 34.

2    Sybille Bedford, "Frontier Regions", The Spectator, October 29th, 1965, p. 555.

Eventually, Barbara's symbolic escape and disguise enable her to inhabit her own persona more comfortably; and her solution to the problem of life and identity, as she observes to Suzi Ramdez, is a religious one.

"Well, either religious faith penetrates everything in life or it doesn't. There are some experiences that seem to make nonsense of all separations of sacred from profane - they seem childish. Either the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart. Sex is child's play in the argument.' She was thinking of the Eichmann trial, and was aware that there were other events too, which had rolled away the stone that revealed an empty hole in the earth, that led to a bottomless pit. So that people drew back quickly and looked elsewhere for reality, and found it, and made decisions, in the way that she had decided to get married, anyway."<sup>1</sup>

Freddy Hamilton's "flowering" is more equivocal; the results of his assertion of self are initially, he believes, the tragic death of his mother; yet later, memories of this free and exciting time return to him and sweeten his life: and the balance of the book rests in favour of his freer, less inhibited self.

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1 The Mandelbaum Gate, pp. 307 - 308.

"And all this conversation was soon to be gone from his memory for many months, suddenly returning on a day when the sun was a crimson disc between the bare branches of Kensington Gardens, and the skaters on the Round Pond were all splashed over the heads and arms with red light, as they beat their mittens together and skimmed the dark white ice under the sky. So it was to be throughout the years; it was always unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, that the sweetest experiences of his madness returned; he was amazed at his irresponsibility for a space, then he marvelled that he could have been so light-hearted, and sooner or later he was overwhelmed with an image, here and there, of beauty and delight, as in occasional memories of childhood."<sup>1</sup>

The only other "free" characters in the book are the members of the strange community at Acre, where the sole bond is that of age, and the labels of generation and race are rejected. Here Abdul and Mendel sing their song of freedom, a bastardized version of all the orthodoxies they have rejected (see pp. 115 - 116); and D. J. Enright has noted Miss Spark's sympathy for those who belong "to nothing but themselves."<sup>2</sup>

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1    *ibid*, pp. 271 - 272.

2    D. J. Enright, "Public Doctrine and Private Judging", New Statesman, October 15th, 1965, p. 563.



Finally, however, I argued for the piety of The Mandelbaum Gate, suggesting that the novel was in some sense a devotional act. Yet its piety is itself paradoxical; and if faith is affirmed, it is quietly and decently done. On the surface there is satiric game made of religious schism and faction: each custodian of a holy relic feels he guards the true centre of Christianity, Abdul, a Moslem, is baptized as a Catholic as insurance, rival altars compete in the churches. It is managed with Miss Spark's usual precision and neatness.

"When the Mass was ended and he moved from the altar towards the friars, the youngest again made a move as if to say a few wild words. But both elders restrained him; and when the Englishman brushed past them, muttering the prayers appointed to be said after Mass, the friars stood mute, with downcast eyes, content to wait for their justification in Heaven, which, being all Italian territory, would be so ordered that foreign firebrands like this one would be kept firmly in their place."<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Vaughan's pilgrimage is inextricably confused with her personal dilemma, and seems hardly calculated anyway to promote devotion. Yet after all the irreverence and fun, the solidity and beauty of faith remain: the author in several places creates the effect of lifting up her narrative

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1 The Mandelbaum Gate, p. 215.

on to another plane, giving a sense of the human spirit reaching up and outwards with all the grandeur and sublimity of which it is capable.

"Freddy waited. The night now began to give out the chanting of the minarets, from Israel across the border to the west of the convent, then nearer, to the north, from the direction of the Holy Sepulchre. It was three o'clock. The chanting voices echoed each other from height to height like the mating cries of sublime eagles. This waiting for the return of Alexandros in the morning hours of Jerusalem was one of the things Freddy was to remember most vividly later on, when he did at last remember the nights and days of his fugue. From the east, beyond the Wailing Wall, a white-clad figure raised his arms in the moonlight and now began his call to prayer, and soon, from far in the south, then in the south-east, and from everywhere, the cry was raised."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, through inhabiting a divided city, the individual becomes whole; through questing obedience to the highest we know, the individual becomes free; through the acceptance of chaos, the world is unified. The Mandelbaum Gate is a huge paradox which finally makes an affirmation of faith.

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1    *ibid*, p. 155.

The acceptance of paradox, the balanced refusal to claim a monopoly on the truth, the anchoring of faith and its dictates to individual character render the religious viewpoint of The Mandelbaum Gate particularly cogent.

Barbara Vaughan's acceptance of the religious view demonstrably opens her out to life's fullest potential; yet the novel's scepticism in the face of schism and ideology confirms the primacy and value of the individual solution. The novel is, ultimately, a liberating experience.

### Fiction as Play

Miss Spark's fictional endeavours reveal a progression from a low, questioning view of her craft to an acceptance of the novel as a fit tool for serious ends. Thus, though she is not a moral writer in that she demonstrates concrete issues of conduct, or attempts to research the minutiae of the moral life as such, she has shaped her peculiar, mannered works into objects which reveal dimensions beyond the temporal; the moral and metaphysical connotations of the apparently random and trivialized. This forcing (and due attention ought to be paid to the strain and precarious balance of the enterprise) results in a moral



fiction; novels which play up their own craft and craftiness in order both to reveal the world as God's novel (whose shape only He can see) and to display the artefact as, in many ways, more shapely and elegant, but always invented. The ambiguities of conduct, as with *Sandy Stranger*, are exposed; the paradox of faith, as with *Barbara Vaughan*, asserted; the spiritual dimensions of existence, as in *Memento Mori* are stated. Continuously, the ambition and strain are apparent.

Yet, metaphysical slant aside, the contrary pull towards play, insignificance, non-solution has been observed; and Miss Spark straddles all labels and categories in triumphant evasion. There is a real tension between her faith and her fiction; and while one argues for her a bias towards the eternal, a longing for the equipoise of the spiritual view which esteems and dignifies the human, there is a simultaneous leaning to the world of art, the stylized and formal which leaves out of account "the irregular noses and chins" (George Eliot) of mankind. Her latter novels crystallize the problem with some precision.

It was suggested in Chapter One that her mode of procedure in these late fictions is comparable to some aspects of Trollope's work, where manners are reflected and noted for comic effect. The distinction was also made, however, that the world which she portrays is one in which moral values are almost wholly absent; her characters'

scruples are directed towards the securing of pleasure and profit rather than moral growth. The aim which lurks behind this surface (for there is a sense in which the novels are all surface) seems to me to be twofold. First, there is the immediate purpose of satirizing the corrupt and effete nature of contemporary civilization, and secondly, Miss Spark wishes to underline the complete divorce between current society and the eternal world, which passes on "invisible and implacable"<sup>1</sup> and out of the reach of men.

The continuity between this latter aim and her earlier desire to reveal the metaphysical dimensions of existence will be clear. But her method and stance are dissimilar. Now she chooses to satirize by a parodistic dependence on the worlds and vocabularies she criticizes; and such is her intuition of the gulf between man and God, or the spiritual world, that there is little reference to anything beyond the contingent, no earnest of "another world than this". The characters who people these late novels are almost uniformly grotesque, selfish, unpleasant, or depraved. Miss Brodie and Mabel Pettigrew appear innocent by contrast; and the reader witnesses their posturings, distanced both by their unsympathetic natures and by their creator's detached tone. These late fictions are, in fact, nicely calculated "to disturb"; but estimates of the quality and significance of their disturbance will vary.

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, The Takeover, p. 180

It is no accident that Rome, the eternal city, is the background for The Public Image and The Driver's Seat; yet it is not portrayed or used as the centre of Christian belief, the repository of culture, the symbol of the accumulated wisdom of western civilization. It does not rest on the Seven Hills, but is cradled in the "Seven Capital Sins ..... the Seven Capital Sins being pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth."<sup>1</sup> It is a degraded noisy place, the scene of pick-ups, orgies, the detritus of the film industry, a seized-up centre for the tyranny of the motor car. Just as Jerusalem the holy became a symbol for fissure, split, disharmony both personal and national, Miss Spark's Rome is a parodistic version of the ideal city, where even the beauties of the past are seen as the results of man's depraved or duplicitous nature:-

"They drove round a deserted piazza with a fountain playing heartlessly, its bowl upheld by a group of young boys, which was built by the political assassin to placate his conscience; and past the palace of the cardinal who bore the sealed quiet of the whole within his guilt ....."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, The Public Image is centrally concerned with mendacity in its reflection of the deceit involved in the

1 Muriel Spark, The Public Image, 1968, p. 36

2 *ibid*, p. 92



creation of a public persona. Annabel, the shallow heroine, is a film star whose public image, with that of her less successful husband, is of "a famous couple, impeccably formal by the light of day, voluptuously enamoured of each other under cover of night."<sup>1</sup> In fact their union is a parody of marriage, so perverted in its nature that Frederick, the husband, is prepared to commit suicide in circumstances which will cast doubt on Annabel's "bella figura". He acts from spite and envy of his wife; and attempts to destroy her image and her greater success. The gap between projected and actual reality is not only extreme, it is deadly; and in exposing it, Muriel Spark demonstrates her unfailing belief that we have to "stick to the facts".<sup>2</sup>

Regeneration in the novel is indicated by means of Annabel's relationship with her child, who becomes the focus for her care and tenderness and a symbol of her dissatisfaction with the trivial and trivializing world which surrounds her. The child was initially conceived to flesh out her "image"; for even the human soul is a pawn in the mechanical and pernicious world of the media. Though Annabel, in unconscious conformity to the dictates of her image has played the bereaved and pathetic widow<sup>3</sup>, and has initially

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1 *ibid*, p. 35

2 The injunction which Robinson continually makes to January Marlow in Robinson.

3 Muriel Spark, The Public Image, pp. 159 - 160

tried to counter her husband's posthumous attempts at blackmail, at the close of the novel, she rejects such pretence and dishonesty and leaves, impulsively, for Greece with her child. Previously, she has commented that she has got her "baby for years ahead"<sup>1</sup>, indicating her new sense of a proper perspective. Her escape from the corruption of Rome is an attempt to be free, like her child; yet it leaves her feeling, perhaps necessarily, both free and unfree, although her satisfaction with her action subsumes such a division. The novel closes with the very beautiful image of a shell, which acts as a metaphor for the immutable union of mother and child.

"She was pale as a shell. She did not wear her dark glasses. Nobody recognized her as she stood, having moved the baby to rest on her hip, conscious also of the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas."<sup>2</sup>

It is a delicate and poetic reverberation which is momentarily effective; but reflection on the novel suggests that the unbalanced world, which Muriel Spark has so implacably created, the world of whisky bottles by the cot, the

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1    *ibid*, p. 174

2    *ibid*, p. 192

betrayal of friends, the frenzy of reporters and public, cannot be so easily eroded. So that Annabel's escape from the degraded eternal city is at best a stated and symbolic one.

So extreme does Muriel Spark's vision of society become in these late fictions that in Not to Disturb, she employs the Gothic convention to embody it. The reporting of manners, the parodistic dependence on modish slang, such as "macrobiotic", "psychedelic", "you got to relate", "with it", are apparently insufficient to register the horror and danger which are the concomitants to man's corruption of life. Now unnatural and random sexual couplings, monsters in attics and a bloody dénouement are necessary to reveal a world where healthful appetites are unknown and the stimulation of jaded palates the first priority. The servants in that novel who prey parasitically on their masters do so with a keen eye to film and book rights. Having presumably been exploited, they exploit. Affection and even the tenuous blood tie of The Public Image have given way to appetite and greed; and if there is comedy, it is comedy of a very terrible kind.

Muriel Spark records all this with a just and discriminating eye; even in the cavortings of Not to Disturb, the reader recognizes fundamental human traits. Yet, unlike Doris Lessing, for example, who describes a similarly



corrupt society at the close of The Four-Gated City, she provides no obvious positive alternative. Her implicit scale of values has receded to such a degree that it is vestigial; and it is worth turning now to her latest novel, The Takeover to examine that situation in a little more detail.

This novel is indeed, to quote Professor Bradbury, "end-directed".<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is consumed with the knowledge that Western society as author and protagonists know it is coming to a close. It is carefully and exactly set, initially at the time of the oil crisis of 1973; but when that catastrophe first occurs, no individual within the novel has any notion of the magnitude of the change which is about to take place. At dinner, they talk happily of hedges against inflation, the wealth of the economy, the mood of the stock market. Grimly their author comments that they have no idea that "a complete mutation of our means of nourishment had already come into being where the concept of money and property were concerned, a complete mutation not merely to be defined as a collapse of the capitalist system, or a global recession, but such a sea-change in the nature of reality as could not have been envisaged by Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities, 1973, p. 248.

2 Muriel Spark, The Takeover, p. 127.

The collapse of the concept of money penetrates only intermittently to the characters in the novel; for the very rich, like Maggie, are wealthy in a way which almost transcends notions of cash, while Hubert, who searches assiduously for monetary bulwarks against age and discomfort refuses "to eke out my existence or change my philosophy of life according to the cost of oil per barrel."<sup>1</sup> Later in the book, however, Berto, Maggie's husband, has an apprehension of the end when, in June, 1975, Italy turns "half-Communist overnight". He keens at the wake of the privileged society he has known and enjoyed, and imagines that "loro", the mysterious "they" of all human fears will soon take all he has and ultimately destroy him and his class.<sup>2</sup>

These two "takeovers" form part of the background data of this novel, which is conceived very much as a fusion between the reporting of factual contemporary disarray and dilemma and the imaginative extensions of the author. Hence, it is both apt and amusing to note that a further "takeover", that of Maggie's fortune by the dextrous Coco de Renault, is based on the paradigm of Henry Kissinger's "solutions" to various world conflicts and problems. Coco's strategy is "global". He reorganizes Maggie's fortune on a plan "so intricate that it might have been devised primordially by

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1    ibid, p. 147

2    ibid, p. 202

the angels as a mathematical blueprint to guide God in the creation of the world."<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, such a plan is unfathomable, and effectively conceals his depredations. Initially, Maggie feels that he is "a sort of perfected bomb shelter" in the face of the financial holocaust; but later she experiences "sudden little shocks" when news of his various activities comes to light. His brilliance, however, keeps the ultimate revelation at bay until very late in the novel, when the redoubtable Maggie simply turns the tables, holds him to ransom and presumably "takes over" her fortune once more.

The other major takeover in the foreground of the novel is Hubert's determined attempt to appropriate one of Maggie's houses for himself. Old ties and merit make this property rightfully his, he feels; and he sets about the task of staking his claim with pertinacity in the face of Maggie's growing estrangement. Systematically, he has her priceless furniture and pictures copied, and substitutes fakes for the originals, which fetch handsome prices. The habitual Spark irony leads him to find that one original is already faked, though, while Maggie imagines that her furniture goes to Rome to be repaired and refurbished.

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1    *ibid*, p. 140



His claim to the property at Nemi has a deeper justification in his eyes; for he sees himself as a descendant of Diana of Nemi, of which, he declares, his surname provides proof.<sup>1</sup> In fact, his author indicates that he has come to believe in his spurious lineage since he is, as she comments elsewhere, an "expert self-faker" with a "confidence" which over-rides

"with an orgulous scorn any small blatant contradictory facts which might lead a simple mind to feel a reasonable perplexity and a sharp mind to feel definite suspicion."<sup>2</sup>

Hubert's rekindling of the cult of Diana is in part personal display and, in part, based on a shrewd business acumen. He quickly attracts followers, including two Jesuit priests; and preaches sermons which are witty and ominous. Truth, he asserts, is not literally true. "Truth is never the whole truth". The world is man's; "it is in metaphorical terms our capital"; but man should consume only the fruits thereof. "We should never consume the capital, ever. If we do, we are left with the barren and literal truth".<sup>3</sup>

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1 See The Takeover, pp. 58 and 96.

2 *ibid*, p. 147

3 *ibid*, p. 149

The "ecologically-minded" priest and his brother Jesuit respond absurdly to the metaphors, which leave the reader speculating more fruitfully, one hopes, on the relationship between fact and truth, and the mysterious and real. Such speculation has already been teased by earlier conversations about appearance and reality,<sup>1</sup> while the whole novel worries at such concepts like an exercised mediaeval scholiast.

Hubert's "orgulous" confidence is, however, well tried in the farcical "secret meeting" of his fellowship in Chapter 14, when Pauline Thin attempts to betray him with her frenzied "testimony". Although she is rapidly deflected from her purpose, her references to the Bible point up the deceptive nature of Hubert's cult, and the defection from truth of those Christians who follow him.<sup>2</sup> The scene itself is an inverted and comic version of that scene in Ephesus when St. Paul and the apostles are attacked by the followers of Diana; it is an absurd witness to the perverted nature of contemporary belief. One recognizes in Hubert and his "nature" cult, various contemporary phenomena whose dangerous nature Muriel Spark attacks by the reference to the "godly edifying which is in faith."

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1 *ibid*, p. 102

2 Pauline cites First Epistle to Timothy, ch. I vv 3 and 4; Acts of the Apostles, ch. 19.

Hubert and his followers "worship" Diana in her aspect of goddess of fertility; their "love feast" is a mindless and emotional version of early Christian practice which contains significantly pagan overtones. Nuns and priests joyfully partake; and there is reference in the novel to similar manifestations elsewhere (notably the Ninth International Conference on Charismatic Renewal in the Roman Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>) which Hubert rightly sees as a fellow competitor for funds and followers. Muriel Spark extracts much comic juice from the cavortings of embracing bishops and "charismatic" priests; and, as I have commented, the reader recognizes her timely reference to religious revivals and groupings which depend less on reason than large appeals to the emotions. Such appeals and excesses she regards as absurd and dangerous<sup>2</sup>; and her comic exposure of them, by its close juxtaposition to references to the early Church and the apostles, reasserts a more wholesome and intelligent perspective.

At the root of these cults and manifestations is the sexual impulse, a fact on which Muriel Spark never comments explicitly, but which is deeply apparent to the reader. He links Hubert's cult and the random couplings which follow from it with the sexual permutations of Maggie and her circle. In both circumstances, the sexual unions

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1 Muriel Spark, The Takeover, pp. 208 - 210

2 Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art", Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1971, pp. 25 - 26.



which occur are ironically fruitless, both physically and metaphysically. They bring forth no good fruits, either literal or metaphorical. Indeed, copulation appears (as in Not to Disturb) to be a distraction which passes the time as agreeably as martinis or dinner parties or sun-bathing. The child whom Agata conceives by Lauro is a "mistake", which he views as an effort to entrap him, "the bitch"; but, luckily, it is not allowed to disturb the overall sexual play of the novel, which wheels and circles like the pattern of an elaborate masque.

In the forefront of The Takeover is Muriel Spark's reflection of the manners and mores of the rich, a subject matter which preoccupies her in these late fictions. These "beautiful people" are possessed of more attractions than either the protagonists of Not to Disturb or The Hothouse by the East River, however; for they enjoy that fatal Spark ingredient "style" which makes them, in many guises, most seductive. Lauro, their servant, who passes usefully from bed to bed, when he is discussing the arrangements for his marriage to Betty is depressed by the contrast between the panache of his employers and the peasant-like preoccupations of his new and ostensibly "smart" relatives.<sup>1</sup>

Later, there is cruel satire made of the discrepancy between his plump, trouser-suited wife and the immortal

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1 Muriel Spark, The Takeover, p. 185

Maggie, whose character is at the very centre of the fiction. When Maggie first appears, golden, gleaming, with "a flood-lit look up to the teeth"<sup>1</sup>, the reader anticipates a comic creation of some magnitude. Sadly, this promise is only unevenly attained; for at times, Maggie's screams and shouts about her property bore the reader. At other times, however, her inexhaustible vitality, and the comic gap between her sophisticated exterior and her inner credulity are absurdly rewarding, while her indestructible golden health intimates her descent from pagan Diana herself.

For Maggie and her circle, charming and cultured as they are, and in spite of Berto's presumable Catholicism, are utterly pagan. Christianity appears not to touch them in any way, while the gods they worship are pleasure, profit and power. Their activities centre on the social round, the protection of their position, the retention of their capital. Morals and moral values, whether traditional, religious or individual play no part in their lives. They deceive sexually without scruple or qualm. But (and the qualification must be stressed) they also appear supremely innocent; one sees them often as duplicitous and depraved children playing adult games. This dichotomy between what I have termed their innocence and their amorality is most interesting. It is as if their author sees them as contemporary equivalents of the satiric targets of classical

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1    *ibid*, p. 41



writers like Juvenal. She exposes their shortcomings with a perceptive and unblinking eye, yet does not condemn them explicitly since they have no notion of the true nature of life; they are locked off from any religious or spiritual perspective. As Hubert comments in another context, "Appearances are reality"<sup>1</sup>; and these individuals who devote their lives to superficiality and the surface of things have no inner core or significance. They are all manner.

Their author reflects their behaviour with neutrality; and records no moral values, since there are none. Her standards are almost completely external to the novel, yet there are trifling indications within it as to her bent. For if Maggie and her circle's sexual permutations have the aspect of temporal takeovers, the larger takeovers within the fiction (what I have termed the background data of the novel, that is the oil crisis of 1973, the Italian elections) point fascinatingly to a cyclical view of human life, which sees existence itself as a successive series of global shifts.

Muriel Spark allows Hubert, the apostle of deception, to comment that Christianity "is simply a passing phase" and "even the God of the Old Testament is a complete upstart".<sup>2</sup> He claims that "Diana the huntress, the goddess of nature, and ultimately of fertility, lives on"<sup>3</sup>, thus refuting the

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1    *ibid*, p. 102

2    *ibid*, p. 107

3    *ibid*, p. 107



"ecologically-minded" priest's assertion that the Church has herself absorbed "many pagan nature-rituals".<sup>1</sup> Earlier in the novel, Lauro has visited his mother's grave to conceal some of his loot; but the episode is also employed to reveal Christianity's flimsiness in the face of the older pagan impulse to visit one's ancestors and pay them reverence. "The downcast eyes" of the angel above his mother's grave seem "shiftily afraid to meet those of the living Lauro"; for the former is merely "a feathered adherent of the New-fangled Testament".<sup>2</sup>

Just as chance (or Providence) brought about a world change more significant and far-reaching than any envisaged by Marx or Freud<sup>3</sup>, organized Christianity now appears as a puny bulwark against the vast movements and recessions of existence. It is itself temporal and contingent. The novel, as well as starkly underlining man's inability to control his environment or destiny, gives the reader a profound sense that he is a mere visitor on the surface of the planet he is so prone to regard as his especial property. Muriel Spark has characteristically put the right truth for the wrong reasons once more in Hubert's mouth, when he says that man should only live off the "interest" of the world.<sup>4</sup> This is not a consequence of any "ecological" scruple, but simply because the world is not his. . Indeed, the complex

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1 *ibid*, p. 105

2 *ibid*, p. 79

3 *ibid*, p. 127

4 Muriel Spark, The Takeover, p. 149

and absurd legal situation of Hubert's own house microcosmically sums up the issue; for his house (which he has appropriated from Maggie) is on land which she has bought in good faith, but which, in fact, belongs to Lauro's fiancée, though Massimo de Vita thoughtfully comments that she may, of course, only own the top soil. "In Italy, sometimes, the sub-soil belongs to somebody else."<sup>1</sup>

The novel discloses that the "kindly fruits of the earth"<sup>2</sup>, the evidence of God's handiwork, are lent, not given. Man has taken them over because his greed and acquisitiveness, as the characters in this novel reveal, are innate. Like the sexual tarantella which Maggie and Hubert and Berto and Lauro dance, they are toys which distract man from the unpleasant truth of the implacable divorce between eternal and temporal life.<sup>3</sup> Yet if The Takeover warns that here is no abiding city, it offers no overt comfort. But perhaps because the world portrayed here (so recognizably contemporary and "real") is so full of "omission" and significant absences<sup>4</sup> the reader is inspired, like Graham Greene, to seek its contrary. In the face of our aboriginal calamity, Muriel Spark also intimates,

"the beautiful and dangerous gift of faith which, by definition of the Scriptures, is the sum of

1 *ibid*, p. 191

2 *ibid*, p. 266

3 *ibid*, p. 180

4 Malcolm Bradbury, *op. cit.*, p. 248

things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen."<sup>1</sup>

It may be that she has focused too powerfully on the fallen world. To convey the absent by means of the present is a difficult and tendentious process; and, moreover, in these late novels, her grasp of language and style is not always consistent, which is a major defect in a comic artist and a potential hindrance to her ambitious end. One also has to acknowledge, as she does in comments external to her fiction, the pull exerted over her by the meretricious and tawdry. The world she portrays here is funny and fallen; if the reader remains rooted in its comic insights, the demonic novelist who looks on, paring her fingernails at fornicating nuns and grotesque murders must accept some of the responsibility.

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1 Muriel Spark, The Mandelbaum Gate, p. 18



CONCLUSION

Muriel Spark and Graham Greene have many common aspects and concerns as novelists; they are both unshakably aware of the ambiguities and errors of conduct in a fallen world, and both assent<sup>y</sup> the authority of the individually maintained religious perspective, thus implicitly questioning the autonomy and significance of limited human values, and, moreover, institutionalized religion. Graham Greene's response to the problem of human error is a sympathetic one; his novels reveal that no man (including the reader) is an island in the sea of temporal wrongdoing, and judgement is left to God. By contrast, Miss Spark is prepared to lash the sinner; for, as a satirist, moral values, though they may not be final arbiters of actions, have a real and permanent significance for her. She rejects emotional appeals to "our sentiments of indignation and pity" since she sees their efficacy as short-lived; and suspects that the exercise of such emotions is autotelic, with a minimal feedback into life. Satire or ridicule, however "can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyze its object."<sup>1</sup> Currently, we need the art of satire "because we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd."<sup>2</sup> She argues for more

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1 Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art", p. 25

2 *ibid*, p. 26

"deliberate cunning" in art, pleading for "less emotion and more intelligence"; the scruple of the surgeon and the precision of his knife. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that art comments on life, that its function is to probe the wound in the body politic; but equally tacit is the notion that the artist's process is dependent on "divine cunning", that he must manipulate and structure with intelligence in order to catch lazy man unawares.

Her endorsement of intelligent art leads her to construct very formal "conceited" works whose structure and style often echo the timeliness of her commentary on man. The reader must go about and about to find truth in a Spark novel, but their polish, their clear-sighted knowingness about human beings encourages the effort. Miss Spark does not claim to tell the truth, but her deception enhances it.

Paradoxically, however, she also believes that "knots were not necessarily created to be untied. Questions were things that sufficed in their still beauty answering themselves."<sup>1</sup> The reader must accept the complexity and perplexity of the world presented to him, and to ask the right question is itself an earnest of the truth.

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1 Muriel Spark, The Mandelbaum Gate, pp. 301 - 2

The Mandelbaum Gate proposes the pious solution of love and faith to the problem of existence, and these are themselves seen as values in a destructive and valueless world. The later works do not manage this positive assertion; but the depraved manners which they unflinchingly reflect shock the reader to such a degree that he asks "Is this all? Can this be all?". The "salutary scar" provokes the far-reaching question. Miss Spark's solution, implicit and hidden as it is, may not be the reader's, but to her "moral type of lying" he owes his perception of the issues at stake.



CHAPTER FOUR

IRIS MURDOCH

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In Chapter One, Iris Murdoch was linked with George Eliot in the sense that both treat moral values in their fiction in a speculative fashion, and endeavour to investigate within it what such a term means and entails.<sup>1</sup> Their view of the serious nature of fiction also makes them comparable; for George Eliot believes that the novel should try to reconcile the otherwise immutable gap between ideals and individuals, while Iris Murdoch feels it must restore the morally desirable sense of the utterly unique individual to author and reader alike. Both see the "moral task" as "characteristically endless"<sup>2</sup>; for they share a clear-sighted view of human weakness and vulnerability, though neither would want to minimize the difficult but vital nature of moral progress.

It was also suggested that Miss Murdoch is a speculative novelist in the sense that she uses her fiction to test out some of her hypotheses as a moral philosopher.<sup>3</sup> This effort should be linked with her attempt to rehabilitate many religious or specifically Christian concepts, divorced from their traditional contexts. Thus, essays

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1 see pp. 35 - 36

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 28

3 see pp. 14 - 15

and novels alike explore and embody the possibility and consequences of notions such as grace, the efficacy of prayer, the idea of perfection, metaphysical union. Their investigations thus move radically out from the questioning of Graham Greene and Muriel Spark who largely accept traditional moral values as "given", though her tentative conclusions (for she is again like George Eliot in her balance and toleration) paradoxically often endorse the traditional Christian ethic.

This chapter begins with a brief examination of some of the philosophical assumptions which it sees as important to Iris Murdoch's fiction. It then goes on to consider what is termed the first stages of morality, that is, seeing things as they are and oneself as one is. Here Under the Net and two characters from The Bell, Dora Greenfield and Michael Meade, are examined.

The next section looks at morality and relationships, since Iris Murdoch regards these, and particularly love relationships, as the crucial testing ground for conduct. Love is, for her, the highest good; and a survey of The Sandcastle, an early novel, and The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, a late one, attempts to chart her characters' efforts to attain that end, and their constant and apparently inevitable falls from grace.

Lastly, the section entitled Fiction and Concepts looks at some of the ideas, such as freedom or love, which



are patterned into the fiction, attempting to link these with Iris Murdoch's perennial philosophical concerns (which, indeed, is the effort of the whole chapter) and to establish the very idiosyncratic and fascinating nature of her fictional universe.

Iris Murdoch's View of Man and Moral Values

From the early days of her monograph on Sartre, Iris Murdoch has continuously examined and rejected many contemporary views of man and existence as inexact and illusory. In Against Dryness, she sketches Stuart Hampshire's image of modern man. He is a self-sufficient, self-centred creature whose fundamental virtue is his "sincerity"<sup>1</sup>; and since there is nothing which transcends him, he is "morally speaking, monarch of all he surveys."<sup>2</sup> This picture she links with Sartre's view of the "solitary and totally free"<sup>3</sup> individual; and again comments that there is "no transcendent reality"<sup>4</sup>, and his sole virtue is, once more, sincerity.

Morality for such a man becomes a matter "of thinking clearly and then proceeding to outward dealings with other men"<sup>5</sup>; for rationality and the individual will are primary constituents in the moral life, which is only to be meaningfully thought of as taking place in the public world. The term "good" thus becomes a kind of movable label to be attached to different acts, while morality emerges as the

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1 Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch", Encounter, January, 1961, vol. 16, p. 17.

2 *ibid*, p. 17

3 *ibid*, p. 17

4 *ibid*, p. 17

5 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 8

fairly automatically willed consequence of a clear-sighted vision of man and the world.

For Iris Murdoch, however, man and existence are not to be so swiftly perceived and facilely dealt with, while moral tasks are endless and difficult. In place of the relatively objective individual and straightforward moral life just instanced, she proposes a less simplistic view of man and the world, which takes into account not only the multiplicity and divergency of what we have to understand, but the deceptiveness and limitation of our own natures in the pursuit.<sup>1</sup> Man for her is complex, perplexing and paradoxical; his "opacity" cannot be easily pierced or dismissed, while the empirical world is "brute and nameless" and "more than and other than our descriptions of it".<sup>2</sup> The individual, too, has to fight the snares of fantasy and self-delusion in turning outward to life and other people; for his "fat relentless ego"<sup>3</sup> hinders clarity of vision while "personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams ..... prevents one from seeing what is there outside one."<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps worth noting in passing that for her man is thus reduced to a condition very like that of original

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", pp. 78 - 79

2 Iris Murdoch, Sartre, Romantic Rationalist, 1953, p. 13

3 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 52

4 *ibid*, p. 59



sin, a state which she reflects throughout her fiction where the obscurity of existence and man's temptation to fantasy are marked. The section which follows, "Seeing things as they are and Oneself as One is", will concentrate particularly on the self-deluding or blind individual.

Elsewhere, she uses a simile borrowed from physics to illuminate the mysterious nature of the self and its often enigmatic and irrational acts. She compares it to "an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice."<sup>1</sup> This "machine" like psyche "in order to operate ..... needs sources of energy"<sup>2</sup>, and one of its major resources is "day-dreaming"<sup>3</sup>. Miss Murdoch believes that fantasy "the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called 'will' or 'willing' belongs to this system."<sup>4</sup>

The picture of the individual which emerges here is of a creature much less rational and in control of himself

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1    *ibid*, p. 54

2    Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 78

3    *ibid*, p. 78

4    Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 67

than is frequently assumed. He is prone to apparently mechanical patterns of behaviour, which are either designed to protect himself or to provide him with sources of "energy". His area of free choice is severely circumscribed. Fantasy, the creation of self-dramas, energizes him. His relationship with others is often parasitic, since they can provide him with the power which he requires to perpetuate himself. Miss Murdoch's debt to Freud is apparent; and indeed, she believes that any contemporary moral philosophy must take account of the Freudian view of man.<sup>1</sup> Also apparent is the link between her fiction and this viewpoint; for in the majority of her novels, one perceives characters who "prey" on others, or receive "energy" from their lives and natures. The Flight from the Enchanter, with its patterns of attraction towards and repulsion from Mischa Fox, the enslaver, powerfully embodies this theme, while The Unicorn portrays a universe where the majority of its characters "use" the enigmatic figure of Hannah for their own ends. The image of the machine-like nature of man and his relationships is also densely worked into The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, as I shall attempt to uncover in the section on morality and relationships.<sup>2</sup>

But in spite of this gloomy view of man and his potential, Iris Murdoch still believes that moral values and morality are meaningful and important. Man is not

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1    ibid, p. 46

2    see pp. 320 - 323 and p. 329

naturally good or unselfish; but his efforts to refine his nature have significance. She asks, "Are we not certain that there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct, that goodness 'really matters'?"<sup>1</sup> Moving against the current of much contemporary philosophy, she asserts that the philosopher should still attempt to answer questions like "What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better?"<sup>2</sup> Man's intermittent ability to love unselfishly and with nobility she regards as evidence that "we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good."<sup>3</sup> It thus appears that while man may be fallen, he turns his face instinctively to the good.

She suggests that the central concept of morality is "'the individual' thought of as knowable by love, thought of in the light of the command, 'Be ye therefore perfect'".<sup>4</sup> This does not entail the esoteric, however, as her example of M and her daughter-in-law, D in her essay, "The Idea of Perfection", shows. Briefly, what Iris Murdoch relates in this case history is a situation where M has initially thought of D as "vulgar" and undignified. She has outwardly behaved impeccably to her, but inwardly regards her as beyond the pale. Later, however, since she is a fair-minded woman, she doubts her first judgement. She attempts

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 60

2 *ibid*, p. 52

3 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" p. 103

4 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 30



to consider D and her behaviour again, and discovers that what she had thought of as "vulgarity" was, in fact, spontaneity, so that, ultimately, her whole viewpoint undergoes a radical shift.

Iris Murdoch infers that while M has done nothing in the sense of a publicly observable act, she has been "morally active"<sup>1</sup>; for she has attempted not only to see D clearly but also "justly or lovingly"<sup>2</sup>. She has been engaged in the process of what Simone Weil terms "attention"<sup>3</sup>, where the gazer endeavours to forget self and turn outward truthfully to the unself. This inner process is both endless and difficult; for clarity of vision is not "natural" to man, and he himself changes and has to adjust his viewpoint accordingly. It is, in fact, a process of learning the meaning of moral concepts, since being rational and possessing ordinary language does not mean we "'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words."<sup>4</sup>

The moral life is thus not essentially a question of publicly observable acts, nor is it a question of "debts and promises"<sup>5</sup>. Moral values are not merely to be discerned on the occasion of "explicit moral choices"<sup>6</sup>; for

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1    *ibid*, p. 20

2    *ibid*, p. 23

3    *ibid*, p. 34

4    *ibid*, p. 29

5    Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts",

6    Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 37

the moral life "goes on continually"<sup>1</sup> and covers "the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world".<sup>2</sup> This concept of the, as it were, constancy of the moral life, I believe Iris Murdoch shares with George Eliot, which helps to explain the insistently moral nature of their fictional universes.

The right act becomes not a consequence of a splendid exertion of will, as some other philosophers believe; it is not an isolated peak. Rather, it arises from "the whole activity of our consciousness", "out of the quality of our usual attachments"<sup>3</sup>, and properly coheres with the metaphorical assumption that individuals possess a "fabric of being". She thinks that our ability to act well in time of trial is dependent upon "the quality of our habitual objects of attention"<sup>4</sup>, reminding one of characters like Ann in An Unofficial Rose or Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine in this assertion. For both these women (whose situations and husbands are hauntingly comparable) ultimately "grow" to the right act, which springs from their unchanging respect and love for their families and homes, their unflinching and happy acceptance of the responsibilities which life has presented to them. After agony,

1 *ibid*, p. 37

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," p. 97

3 *ibid*, p. 92

4 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 56

indecision and false starts, they evolve slowly to a stage where they are able to, in Ann's case, release Randall, but wait for him, and in Harriet's, to decide (though she is tragically prevented from realizing her intention) to return to England, husband and duty.

The view that the "right act" is a reflection of the individual's innermost self and the quality of his attachments would not, I think, be foreign or antipathetic to a great number of people, but her assumption that "true vision occasions right conduct"<sup>1</sup> might be more difficult both to grasp and to accept. Instead of the will alertly "choosing" what to do or how to deploy itself, she pictures it as obedient to a world which is "compulsively present".<sup>2</sup> The moral agent "attends" in a disciplined way to what is outside himself and, eventually, if he sees properly, there will be only one way to act. "If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at."<sup>3</sup> This process and situation she compares to that of the saint or the artist.

Moving out from this concern with what might be termed the individual moral life and the problem of conduct, she addresses herself to the question of the transcendent. She believes that "the idea of the transcendent,

1 *ibid*, p. 66

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 39

3 *ibid*, p. 40



in some form or other, belongs to morality"<sup>1</sup>; but acknowledges that it is difficult to interpret. She can envisage no external point or *Τέλος* to life<sup>2</sup>, though she accepts as a "psychological fact" that "God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy"<sup>3</sup>, while prayer, in the sense of "an attention to God which is a form of love"<sup>4</sup> can "actually induce a better quality of consciousness and provide an energy for good action which would not otherwise be available."<sup>5</sup>

In place of God, she substitutes "the idea of Good as a central point of reflection"; for this will not only enable us to unify and order our vision of life<sup>6</sup>, but will provide a focus to work towards and a stimulus to goodness. Goodness and the Good are alike mysterious<sup>7</sup>; but the attempt to look away from self to "a distant transcendent perfection"<sup>8</sup> may release new energies and provide a fresh source of "quite undreamt-of virtue"<sup>9</sup>. This "magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves"<sup>10</sup> can help to awaken our better selves

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 58

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 79

3 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 56

4 *ibid*, p. 55

5 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 83

6 *ibid*, p. 95

7 *ibid*, p. 99

9 *ibid*, p. 101

8 *ibid*, p. 101

10 *ibid*, p. 102

"for the idea of perfection moves, and possibly changes us", inspiring love "in the part of us that is most worthy."<sup>1</sup>

More contentiously, as she acknowledges, she connects goodness with the fullest possible acceptance of the random, transient and fortuitous nature of man and existence. She argues that only by deeply realizing the notion of the death of the self can we understand "the full extent of what virtue is like"<sup>2</sup>, an intimation as foreign to us as it is necessary.

Possibly she sees such an acceptance as a means of initiation into the difficult concept of the Good which would highlight the latter's "absolute for-nothingness"<sup>3</sup>. The concept of Good has nothing to do, she insists, with religion, power, the problem of evil, rewards, or freedom; and she links it with Plato's image of the Sun, on which she comments in some detail. Briefly, the light of the sun enables the "moral pilgrim"<sup>4</sup> after trial, error and suffering to see the world truthfully in its light and, ultimately, "he would be able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature ..... as it is in itself in its own domain."<sup>5</sup>

1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 62

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 103

3 *ibid*, p. 92

4 *ibid*, p. 92

5 The Republic of Plato, translated by Francis Cornford, 1955, p. 225

The Good thus gradually reveals the world in its true relations and, possibly, may be finally contemplated itself.

The concept of Good does not therefore exist to engender right action alone, though she urges that "right action ..... is a proper criterion of virtue".<sup>1</sup> Good exists nakedly in and for itself and the only "genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing'".<sup>2</sup> That 'for nothing' is possibly a local manifestation of the "non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself".<sup>3</sup>

The last important aspect of her view of man and moral values on which I want to comment is the relationship which she detects between art and morals, which she insists are "two aspects of a single struggle".<sup>4</sup> In his efforts to render a "selfless attention to nature" the artist is very like the good man Iris Murdoch has pictured. His discipline in struggling to purify his talent and represent what is true is a moral discipline. Good art reveals the randomness and particularity of the world, linked to a "sense of unity and form".<sup>5</sup> It also reminds us how "differently the world looks to an objective vision"<sup>6</sup>; and provides "a

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 71

2 *ibid*, p. 71

3 *ibid*, p. 71

4 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 41

5 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts",  
p. 86

6 *ibid*, p. 86



truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated."<sup>1</sup>

Nor does it merely serve to remind us of some of the truths of existence; for since it transcends the limited and self-absorbing personality of artist and public and forces us to see what is "out there" beyond us, it can "enlarge the sensibility of its consumer" becoming "a kind of goodness by proxy".<sup>2</sup> "The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is ..... the easiest available spiritual exercise"<sup>3</sup>, while good art "affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent"<sup>4</sup>, which is surely akin to the mysterious enkindling power of the notion of perfection. This deep commitment to a serious notion of art is central to Iris Murdoch and her fictional universe; and it frequently finds a most happy embodiment in the appreciation of art, which is itself a moral step, by characters like Dora Greenfield in The Bell. A version of it is also comically, but fervently, put forward by Bledyard in The Sandcastle, as I shall later have occasion to show.<sup>5</sup>

This consideration of the transcendent in Iris Murdoch's view of man and morals may suggest that what she

1    *ibid*, p. 87

2    *ibid*, p. 87

3    Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", pp. 64 - 65

4    Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts",  
p. 85

5    see pp. 305 - 306

advocates is a somewhat mysterious and esoteric discipline, full of interest, but lacking in relevance to the ordinary man. This is far from the case. Her philosophy and her fiction both reveal considerable respect for decent ordinary individuals who struggle to behave well, even if only at a conventional level. She believes there must be a "give and take between the private and public levels of morality",<sup>1</sup> which can often be advantageous to both. Nor is the "conventional" level, in her opinion, as simple as is often assumed, while the process of looking at an ideal can swiftly be perverted. She urges, too, her awareness "of the moral dangers of the idea of morality as something which engages the whole person and which may lead to specialized and esoteric vision and language."<sup>2</sup> Realistically, she knows that man is perfectly capable of perverting the concept of perfection. What she advocates is "a background to morals" which will properly be "some sort of mysticism", that is "a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience."<sup>3</sup> It remains now to see where and how these ideas find their embodiment in her fiction.

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 43

2 *ibid*, p. 43

3 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 74

The First Stages of Morality: Seeing Things as They are  
and Oneself as One is

Iris Murdoch often sees human life as a series of stages, she envisages "degrees of freedom"; and her thinking on morality conceives of gradation in moral behaviour, and sometimes of a distinct progression in doing good and being good. Her insistence on the obscurity and darkness of existence has been remarked;<sup>1</sup> and it is not therefore surprising that the first stages of right conduct for her reside in the removal of obscurity, the lightening of the gloom. In her first novel, Under the Net, she portrays the removal of intellectual blinkers from its hero's eyes as essential to his moral enlightenment; until he sees people and things as they are, he cannot behave properly. The patterning of life according to one's own needs or prejudices is portrayed as dishonest, and its consequences as calamitous. This emphasis she has never retreated from, and novels as late as The Black Prince or The Sacred and Profane Love Machine disclose the frequently dangerous muddle which results from inexact or illegitimate notions of the character and behaviour of others. Her attitude is thus comparable to Muriel Spark's anxiety over the human

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1 see p. 242



tendency to pattern and order in accordance with inner need.<sup>1</sup>

Equally important, in her view, is the virtue of self-awareness, though she visualizes this as a two-edged weapon<sup>2</sup>; for self-knowledge can simply immerse the individual in self-preoccupation and self-drama, which effectively prevent right action, as the characterization of Michael Meade in The Bell, for example, intelligently demonstrates. But a degree of insight into the workings of the self would appear to be essential before the individual can turn outwards to the world; for only if his self-map is exact can he allow for his own mental squint. The Murdochian universe is peopled by those who get themselves wrong, possibly because they cannot "see" themselves at all, as is the case with Dora in The Bell, or who think they are above temptation, as with Ducane in The Nice and the Good, or who imagine they are capable of more disinterested behaviour than they can, in fact, manage, as with Edmund in The Italian Girl. Muddle, confusion, danger are the inevitable concomitants of this self-ignorance; they are sunk in a situation very like that of original sin, as I have commented.<sup>3</sup> I shall begin by looking at Jake Donaghue's comic immersion in this slough.

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1 see pp.205 - 208

2 see "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 67

3 see p. 242 I owe this insight to Graham Martin's essay "Iris Murdoch and the Symbolist Novel".

Under the Net is "philosophical criticism"<sup>1</sup>; it also now reads like a parable on Miss Murdoch's conceptual and aesthetic preoccupations. A major concern is the self-ease of the artist; like Muriel Spark in The Comforters, she is to a degree "making it alright" with herself to write a novel, balancing the demands of form and experience, the shaped and the random. At the heart of these aesthetic problems lies Wittgenstein's view of language; indeed the title employs a phrase of his which sees concepts as a sort of fine mesh thrown over the brute stuff of existence. Miss Murdoch does not seem quite sure at this very early stage whether art is truthful; there is an attraction towards the theory of silence very close to Beckett's view of life and art.

Contemporaneous with this exciting investigation (for her dexterity in controlling a fluid narrative while patterning events and characters in her conceptual debate is remarkable) is Jake Donaghue's progress to self-knowledge; the escape from a false theory of art (the shaped and formalized) to no theory at all; the removal of views and notions of the lives and souls of others, proved by the novel's structure to be entirely erroneous.

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1 Peter Wolfe, The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and her Novels, 1966, p. 46

The novel recognizably embodies aspects of her early view of the "opacity" of persons and existence; for it records its hero's stumbling progress from a mistaken idea of people and relationships (Jake initially refuses to believe Sadie's claim that Hugo pursues her, since he tends to devalue her at the expense of her sister, Anna. The novel exactly disproves his illusion) to a clearer, less self-indulgent viewpoint. Intimately linked with this progress (which is itself a moral development as the initial section of this chapter will have revealed) is Jake's movement to the rejection of a false theory of art (the shaped and formalized) in favour of no theory at all.

For Iris Murdoch, in her early reflections on life and art, closely related the philosophical viewpoints which she rejected with, in her view, a correspondingly inadequate type of art and fiction. In "Against Dryness", she expressed the view that symbolist art embodied an equivalence between the self-contained symbol and the view of man as a self-contained, easily-comprehended personality. Novels such as William Golding's Lord of the Flies, she termed "crystalline", emphasizing that their form or shapeliness, and their central myth is more important than any portrayal of individual characters. In the place of the rich and informed view of the human condition which the nineteenth century novel in the hands of its master practitioners enjoyed, there is a "dry" view of life, a narrower compass



and shallower depth, a concentration on form, rather than on the random shapelessness of existence.

Form is itself a "consolation"; indeed it is an "aspect of our desire for consolation"<sup>1</sup> which endangers our sense of reality, fixing our attention on what we can compass and control instead of the intractable nature of existence. In "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" she urges that

"Form is the temptation of love and its peril, whether in art or life; to round off a situation, sum up a character. But the difference is that art has got to have form, whereas life need not."<sup>2</sup>

In both these essays she speaks of balancing the individuality of characters against the central myth or form of the fiction itself, insisting that "real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy, and opens the way for imagination."<sup>3</sup> This is, perhaps surprisingly, not far from Muriel Spark's notion

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1 Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness", p. 31; reprinted in The Novel Today, 1977, ed. Malcolm Bradbury

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", The Yale Review, December 1959, vol. 49, p. 271

3 Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness", p. 31

of the relationship between the author and his characters and the "deceitful" nature of fiction;<sup>1</sup> and both novelists endeavour to direct the reader out to truths external to the novel itself.

Jake Donaghue, the hero of Under the Net, thus becomes a moral pilgrim in the sense of his eventual self-enlightenment, which has important repercussions for him in the field of personal relationships; and he also stands as a persona for the artist herself who is struggling to escape from the blandishments of a false and "immoral" theory of art.

The exact equivalence of his dual development illustrates his creator's view of art and morals as "two aspects of a single struggle"<sup>2</sup>; the moral discipline of art corresponds to the moral discipline necessary for life.

The form which Miss Murdoch employs for this ambitious dialectic is that of the picaresque novel. It is also "roman-mythe", a novel which in John Cruickshank's definition "adds a metaphysical dimension to the temporal events it describes".<sup>3</sup> The ideal "open" or non-crystalline

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1 see pp.165 - 166

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 41

3 John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt, 1959, p. 164

novel appears far-off at this stage. Malcolm Bradbury, among others, has observed that Jake, her narrator, is a typical picaresque hero, in that he exists largely outside, or on the fringes of society, moving among Bohemian milieux, engaged in a number of quests, particularly for a home, some money and love.<sup>1</sup> Jake's paramount quest is, however, to discover a *modus vivendi*, a search which is perhaps in the background of much picaresque fiction; but which is here made to have a direct bearing on the novel in the shape of certain explicitly realized philosophical problems which find their fundamental embodiment in Jake's book The Silencer. These are, as I have indicated, centred on the dilemma of the natural and the aesthetic; the opposition between the open, unformed, concrete approach to life and the theorizing and patterning one. Thus, while the events of the book appear random and directionless, they are in fact informed by a very specific purpose, and move on the lines of the examination of these concepts in a most determined fashion; for Iris Murdoch wishes, simultaneously, to investigate the aesthetic and ethical implications of highly-wrought art. Interestingly, however, it appears that she was unable to promote such enquiries by means of a simple naturalistic form. At this stage of her career, while she was impelled, by scruple, in the direction of

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1 Malcolm Bradbury, "Iris Murdoch's Under the Net", Critical Quarterly, 1962, vol. 4, p. 47



George Eliot, she was unable to enjoy comparable technical resources.

The novel contains a mass of symbolic images and reference which have a very relevant part to play in its discussion. Its central enquiry is based on the personality and attitude of Hugo Belfounder of whom Jake, the hero states:-

"I felt like a man who, having vaguely thought that flowers are all much the same, goes for a walk with a botanist. Only this simile doesn't fit Hugo either, for a botanist not only notices details but classifies. Hugo only noticed details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique. I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man ....."<sup>1</sup>

The reader recognizes, too, that he is in the presence of a man capable of what Simone Weil terms "attention".

Later, Jake embodies Hugo's ideas of the unutterable particularity of life (a recognizable aspect of Miss Murdoch's

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, 1963, pp. 68 - 69

belief in contingency) and his own counter arguments in a dialogue called The Silencer. In this Annandine, or Hugo, uses the image of the net as a "symbol for theorizing, or forming concepts about a situation,"<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's image as I have noted.<sup>2</sup>

Annandine remarks:-

"What I speak of is the real decision as we experience it; and here the movement away from theory and generality is the movement toward truth. All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net."<sup>3</sup>

Hugo's whole life is an exemplification of his attitude; for he has chosen specific careers to evade the distortions of art or theory. He chose to work in fireworks, creating set pieces because he imagined that no cant could be talked about their artistry or effects, that people

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1 Antonia Byatt, Degrees of Freedom - the Novels of Iris Murdoch, 1965, p. 15

2 Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus, 1922, vol. 6, p. 341

3 Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, p. 91

would just have to enjoy them because of their ephemerality. But the reaction he most fears is evoked; and he proceeds to films. At the end of the book, that work having proved equally false and misleading, he pursues his philosophy of silence by being apprenticed to a watchmaker. Presumably that is a job which is just done; no one can erect elaborate theories about it, and thus, in his view, tell lies.

To both Jake and Anna, Hugo and his attitude to life are a portent of magnetic power. It is no exaggeration to state that they are both in love with him, and acquire "energy" from him and his ideas: Anna creates the mime theatre, Jake his dialogue, The Silencer. But while both yearn in different ways to possess him, and honour him by their refraction of his views, neither sees him clearly, nor rejoices truthfully in his actual existence, which is a sign of love. To them he becomes a god who, unconsciously and against his will, sets in motion fantasies which titillate and preoccupy them. Both The Silencer and the mime theatre are, to a degree, travesties of Hugo's delight in the unutterable particularity of existence, and unconscious witnesses to his view that theory and language distort. Jake only sees Hugo "clearly for the first time" at the close of the novel in hospital when, significantly, he appears underneath his bandages "like Rembrandt"<sup>1</sup>, the truthful man.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, 1970, p. 227

2 See Bledyard's art lecture in Chapter 16 of The Sandcastle as evidence for Iris Murdoch's view of Rembrandt.



Jake and Anna do not "see" Hugo clearly because he has become part of their self-dramas; they "use" him to feed their egos. Their subsequent behaviour provides exemplification for Iris Murdoch's notion of the psyche.<sup>1</sup> Most sadly, Jake cannot believe that Hugo has himself behaved badly to Sadie because of his obsession with her. He cannot credit that his idol could have feet of clay. Finally, he accepts Hugo's love as a fact, but the revelation is painful, since it means he must rethink his past and particularly his relationship with Anna. Under the Net is comic fiction, but it still engenders, in its description of such a process, a sense of the "moral task" as not only "endless" but also as a matter, often, of the realigning and ordering of a truthful perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Jake's life, too, is patterned around the ideas of freedom and form, but he moves on the contrary principle of working the shapelessness of experience into a significant shape, for as he readily admits, he hates contingency, refusing to believe the surfaces which events and people present to him, insisting on erecting elaborate theories about Madge, Sadie, Anna and Hugo, which events in the novel exactly disprove. He refuses to tell the Circe-like Mrs. Tinckham his misfortunes until they have shape,

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1 See, for example, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 51

2 See her case history of M and D in "The Idea of Perfection", pp. 17 - 37

"But I gritted my teeth against speech. I wanted to wait until I could present my story in a more dramatic way. The thing had possibilities, but as yet it lacked form. If I spoke now there was always the danger of my telling the truth; when caught unawares I usually tell the truth, and what's duller than that?"<sup>1</sup>

The physical appearances of the three women in Jake's life are detailed in such a way that even they reflect on this central theme. Anna is the type of natural, untouched beauty; she is represented as looking slightly wrecked, greying. On the other hand, Sadie and Madge are both symbols of artificial beauty, perfuming and painting with vigour and zeal, touching up nature as language and theory touch up life.

"Her [Jake is speaking of Madge] exertions are directed along the lines suggested to her by women's magazines and the cinema, and it is due simply to some spring of native and incorruptible vitality in her that she has not succeeded in rendering herself quite featureless in spite of having made the prevailing conventions of seduction her constant study. She is not beautiful; that is an

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, 1963, p. 20

adjective which I use sparingly; but she is both pretty and attractive. Her prettiness lies in her regular features and fine complexion, which she covers over with a peach-like mask of make-up until all is as smooth and inexpressive as alabaster. Her hair is permanently waved in whatever fashion is declared to be the most becoming. It is a dyed gold."<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, though, the novel reveals that Sadie, and, to a lesser extent, Madge, are in many respects more "truthful" than Anna, whose whole life centres around subterfuge and personal drama, whatever her "simple" exterior. Appearance, in each case, is exactly deceptive, as Jake learns to his cost.

Similarly, Miss Murdoch's descriptions of London and Paris, the twin locales of the novel, contribute to the thematic substance; for the former is organic, dirty, recognizably the London which we know, the Thames choked with refuse, oily and black; while the latter is artificial, exact, perfectly proportioned, a place of dream and fantasy, which Jake has to leave since he does not find there what he seeks.

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1    *ibid*, pp. 10 - 11



At many points the novel touches allegory; for Jake's journey to Paris, which incidentally embraces his quest for Anna, clearly represents his search for an aesthetic solution to life. Indeed his whole story, within the pages of Under the Net, can be seen as corresponding to the moral examination which is found in a book like The Pilgrim's Progress. Though Miss Murdoch's figures are by no means as schematized as Bunyan's, they are recognizable as conceptual counters in the fundamental debate. Thus Anna is also committed to the philosophy of silence; but on to Hugo's notion she has, paradoxically, erected a whole edifice of convoluted and false theory, so that what takes place at the mime theatre, under her guidance, is by no means simple, although it avoids the so-called distortion of language. Dave Gellman, the philosopher, also avows belief in contingency, in that he objects to metaphysics, to elaborate ethical structures. Jake comments of him:-

"Human beings have to live by clear practical rules, he says, and not by the vague illumination of lofty notions which may seem to condone all kinds of extravagance."<sup>1</sup>

and the novel provides a kind of justification of his view, since, at his suggestion, Jake obtains a part-time job to support himself while writing, and escapes from his cul-de-sac of self-absorption and inactivity.

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1 Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, p. 24

Jake's progress through the book is similar to Christian's in that it is a moral progress, though distinct in that it is aesthetic too, as I have previously commented. The landmarks on his way are not described in terms of the Christian ethic, but via the shocks, surprises and illuminations of unravelling fiction. People explain themselves in true novel convention; and at the end of the novel, from using people and ignoring their real and valuable needs, Jake awakes to a realization that others move, love and exist without reference to his picture of them. Finn, for example, has returned to Ireland; and Mrs. Tinckham guesses his journey is connected with religion. In the initial stages of Under the Net Jake has arrogantly felt that "Finn has very little inner life"<sup>1</sup>; and his loss is a complete thunderbolt. Of Anna, too, he can ultimately say,

"I had no longer any picture of Anna. She faded like a sorcerer's apparition; and yet somehow her presence remained to me, more substantial than ever before. It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself."<sup>2</sup>

He also turns, invigorated, to his writing; the removal of false ideas has removed his bloc.

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1    ibid, p. 9

2    ibid, p. 268

Thus Jake has acquired moral insight, a most traditional achievement for a hero of English fiction; he has become an inhabitant of the Murdoch universe, where to see others and respect them is a moral feat of the highest order. Perhaps, then, it would be as well to term Under the Net a moral or philosophical myth.

But to term Jake's progress traditional in that its end-moral enlightenment-is familiar in English fiction is to underestimate the non-traditional mode Miss Murdoch employs for the revelation. The initial commentary on the novel indicated it was a coming together of the picaresque - it self often a loose, cheerful form - and symbolic fiction; and the highly schematized nature of the undertaking must be stressed. The evolution of knowledge is not achieved via the interaction of character, as in a novel like Middlemarch, nor yet entirely by the surprises of narrative, as in a novel like Bleak House: it is a combination of event and symbolical unravelling, a complex process open to misinterpretation. Characters become counters; and the paradox emerges that to demonstrate moral progress in removing Jake's fantasy, the author resorts to the manipulation of character she regards as suspect. It may be that art attempts the unattainable, and is thus ultimately founded on paradox; yet comparison with other contemporary authors reveals a comparable



recourse to ambiguity, the continuous employment of oblique structures and modes. The broken or strained structure of much modern art reveals the difficult nature of the artist's task. In writing of Under the Net, Professor Bradbury reveals his sense of the problems inherent in a moral contemporary fiction.

"..... many of the scenes are contrived for their sheer ornateness, their capacity to turn surprise. This clearly has something to do with Miss Murdoch's fertility of mind and art, but it also has to do with the problems of eliciting a moral development in modern fiction. Where once the characteristic shape of a novel could be a pattern of the hero's sin, repentance, and absolution, in the modern novel there are other terms to assert: wrong thinking, re-appraisal, true vision, arising from a sense of struggle with predictive form itself."<sup>1</sup>

Jake is able at the close of the novel to maintain an equipoise between silence and false art, to see others clearly for the first time and to honour their autonomy. This achievement, in spite of its embodiment, is close to George Eliot's constant effort to render "that equivalent centre of self from which the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference"; and it is a major

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1 Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities, 1973, p. 246

preoccupation of Miss Murdoch who acutely and sadly realizes that the modern age espouses the individual doctrinally, rather than spontaneously.

"We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction."<sup>1</sup>

Mor, in The Sandcastle regards telling the truth as the foundation of all virtue; and his creator, honouring this, sees the removal of self-deception as its crucial antecedent. Respect for the other, the individual is usually seen as a hallmark of liberal art; yet Graham Greene and Muriel Spark also voiced concern for the unique soul in the teeth of contemporary pressure: and perhaps the most moral business present-day novelists perform is to insist on his validity.<sup>2</sup>

I turn now to an examination of Dora Greenfield and Michael Meade in The Bell, twin studies, in the case of the former, of the lack of self-awareness, and in the latter, of self-deception.

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1 Iris Murdoch, Sartre, p. 76

2 see pp.209 - 210 and 157

In *Dora*, Iris Murdoch examines the potential of the feeling but non-reflective and theoretical person as a moral agent; and the character, as survivor and interpreter of existence, has power. When she first appears in *The Bell*, she is involved in the toils of a difficult and violent marriage, from which she has already made one ineffectual attempt to escape. She is portrayed as a tiresomely inefficient person, muddled in her thinking, without much aim in life, and yet full of vitality and warmth which only succeed in embroiling her deeper in difficulties rather than effecting her release. Because she is unwilling or unable to function as a tidy adjunct to her husband, he exposes her shortcomings with great bitterness. Frightened of him, incapable of adjustment, she yet becomes aware of her existence, if only as a sounding board for his rage. But she still does not indulge in that pastime of judging others as a means of revenge. Iris Murdoch wishes us to recognize this asset.

"Yet withal she did not judge him. A certain incapacity for 'placing' others stood her here in the lieu of virtue. She learned to coax him or to withstand him mutely, cherishing herself, and although she conspicuously lacked self-knowledge, became in the face of this threatening personality increasingly aware that she existed."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*, 1958, p. 10



But if Paul enables her to realize she is by his rigid intolerance, he has deprived her of something equally important, the sense that she is an independent-judging and autonomous individual. At the beginning of the book, she is portrayed in two situations where she is able to exercise a simple act of choice, but in neither can she do so without painful and involved thought, and in the latter circumstance, she never really grows to a decision, unless it is late on. The first incident is where she debates whether to give up her seat in the railway carriage on the way to Imber, which is a microcosm of Iris Murdoch's fascination with choice, and a symbol of the novel's preoccupation with moral decision and action.

"Dora stopped listening because a dreadful thought had struck her. She ought to give up her seat. She rejected the thought, but it came back. There was no doubt about it. The elderly lady who was standing looked very frail indeed, and it was only proper that Dora, who was young and healthy should give her seat to the lady who could then sit next to her friend. Dora felt the blood rushing to her face. She sat still and considered the matter. There was no point in being hasty. It was possible of course that while clearly admitting that she ought to give up her seat she might nevertheless simply not do so out of pure selfishness. This would in some ways be a better situation than what would have been the case if it had simply not

occurred to her at all that she ought to give up her seat."<sup>1</sup>

She dithers and even regards her own "distress as neurotic"; and ultimately, of course, gives up her seat. Comic though it is, the scene indicates the way in which Dora's uneasy growth and marriage have sapped her energy to make simple decisions. Paul's belligerent attempts to force her to grow up have shown her the sort of issues which exist, but not the way in which to handle them. Even though she performs the right action, this sort of enervating nervous debate is hardly sufficient to equip her for the difficulties of adult life, and the conflicting ideals and passions at Imber. In this pitiable state, she is reminiscent of Barbara Vaughan, who, recognizing the complex interplay of motives is yet able because of her religious faith to surrender the whole mess in favour of the decisive act, and the judgement of whether that is right or wrong.

Dora is hardly free to decide in this situation, because she is unable to disentangle her motives, and see the action in a straightforward light. Similarly, when she is entrained for Imber, Noel assures her that she can come away, as she is, after all, "a free agent". Dora is not at all sure of this; her sense of freedom is, by

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1    *ibid*, pp. 16 - 17

virtue of her self-muddle, strictly prescribed. It is true that she escapes, briefly, back to London and Noel; but if one examines the chapter in which these events take place (Chapter Fourteen) it is clear that Dora does not decide to go; rather she flees, in reflex action, from a world which she finds inimical, unreal and detached from herself. In fact, she has become afraid that nothing exists objectively, but only as a reflection of her subjective ideas and experiences. Action is needed to countermand this frightening solipsism.

"She went on and leaned out of the window. The sun was shining, the lake was hard and full of reflections, the Norman tower presented to her one golden face and one receding into shadow. Dora had the odd feeling that all this was inside her head. There was no way of breaking into this scene, for it was all imaginary.

"Rather startled at this feeling, she began to dress and tried to think about something practical. But the dazed feeling of unreality continued. It was as if her consciousness had eaten up its surroundings. Everything was now subjective."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 183



Paul's attitude to Dora echoes that of many characters in The Mandelbaum Gate to Barbara Vaughan; he has no room for her to mature and expand - to be - on her own terms. It is little wonder that in face of his threatening aggression, she begins to feel "flimsy and ephemeral", "merely a thought in his mind",<sup>1</sup> a mirror image of her increasing solipsism.

Progress for Dora is achieved not via the solution of relationships, nor yet through the disentanglement of narrative, as with Jake. It is by revelation; the symbolic set-piece of her experience in the National Gallery. Her own painting and appreciation of art, along with her spontaneous and feeling heart, have acted within her disorganized and often erring life as seeds of potentially good fruit. For while Dora has been unable to "see" herself, she can turn unself-consciously outwards to admire what is beyond her. Her experience in the National Gallery movingly and convincingly exemplifies her creator's view that "the appreciation of beauty in art or nature is ..... the easiest available spiritual exercise".<sup>2</sup> Dora, unlike her husband, Paul, has instinctively enjoyed a "pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent"<sup>3</sup>. When she first sees Imber Court, she exclaims that it is "marvellous", while Paul dryly rejoins that it is not a bad example of its kind. To him, works of art are to be coded,

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1 *ibid*, p. 40

2 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", pp. 64 - 65

3 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 85

classified and, thus, ultimately, brought within his possession. His power-seeking psyche endeavours to bring as much of experience as possible within his maw. That is not to deny, of course, his clarity of mind, nor even the sense which the novel deftly conveys of his proficiency as a scholar. It is, however, to stress by the comparison of his and Dora's responses that Iris Murdoch sees Dora as a brand which could be plucked from the burning, for her appreciation of art is "a completely adequate entry into ..... the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real."<sup>1</sup>

The viewing of the art object frees Dora from her personal limbo; life exerts its autonomy, and afterwards, she is eventually able (though not without error and muddle) to make proper decisions about her marriage and to see herself as real. She has, in her creator's eyes, reached the first stage of moral behaviour; but the plot of The Bell reveals how dangerous and irresponsible her previous actions and decisions have been .

"Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures,

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 65

their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who had said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. Even Paul, she thought, only existed now as someone she dreamt about; or else as a vague external menace never really encountered and understood. But the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all."<sup>1</sup>

The characterization of Michael Meade provides a parallel and contrast to the study of Dora; if the latter is originally unable to turn outwards because of a crucial lack of self-awareness, a proper sense of her rôle, Michael is self-immured through self-deception. The former faces

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Bell, pp. 191 - 192



life instinctually and impulsively; the latter abstractly and theoretically. Both are portrayed as ineffectual moral agents, or even dangerous ones (the plot of the novel reveals joint guilt for Nick Fawley's death) until they are able to see clearly and hence act. Michael's vice is self-fantasy, "the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images."<sup>1</sup> This, coupled with his desire to remove the responsibility for choice and action to a pre-determined pattern of signs and portents, Iris Murdoch exposes as comparable in immaturity and immorality as Dora's flight from bed to bed.

James in his sermon in The Bell speaks of the need to be without any "image of oneself"<sup>2</sup>; and asserts the selfless dedication to rules admired in Dave Gellman of Under the Net or the Abbess in The Bell. Michael, however, roots his faith in his self image, justifying what is patently an inner flaw by an illegitimate wrenching of the comments and teaching of others from their contexts. The Abbess has spoken to him of the need not to search out the highest and hardest task, but "to seek that place, that task, those people, who will make our spiritual life most constantly grow and flourish; and in this search .... [to] .. make use of a divine cunning."<sup>3</sup> The emphasis which Michael has placed on what he recognizes to be a piece of authoritative

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 67

2 Iris Murdoch, The Bell, p. 132

3 *ibid*, pp. 82 - 83

wisdom is inevitable, given his particular personality and difficulties. He sees that to achieve any sort of spiritual success, the individual must reflect on his situation and his own response to it, and, by careful thought and circumspection, choose the task which he is most fitted to do. Opposing James, he argues:-

"'The chief requirement of the good life', said Michael, 'is that one should have some conception of one's capacities. One must know oneself sufficiently to know what is the next thing. One must study carefully how best to use such strength as one has.'"<sup>1</sup>

By sandwiching Michael's doubts and his dilemma concerning Toby Gashe between the text of his sermon, Miss Murdoch demonstrates that his religious beliefs are closely juxtaposed to his weaknesses as a man. Michael knows it is his duty to know himself, but he does not realize until the end of the book, that self-examination constitutes his own particular brand of wrong-doing. It never advances his knowledge of himself, rather sinks him in a morass of guilt, which possesses for him a perverse enjoyment. As Iris Murdoch comments elsewhere, his self-examination "merely strengthens" the power of "the fantasy mechanism".<sup>2</sup>

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1    *ibid*, p. 201

2    Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 67

"Michael returned to his seat ..... He wondered how obvious it had been that he was saying the exact opposite of what James had been saying last week. This led him to reflect on how little, in all the drama of the previous days, he had dwelt upon the simple fact of having broken a rule. He recalled James's words: sodomy is not deplorable, it is forbidden. Michael knew that for himself it was just the how and why of it being deplorable that engaged his attention .....

"It was complicated; it was interesting: and there was the rub. He realized that in this matter, as in many others, he was always engaged in performing what James had called the second best act: the act which goes with exploring one's personality and estimating the consequences rather than austere-ly following the rules. And indeed his sermon this very day had been a commendation of the second best act. But the danger here was the very danger which James had pointed out: that if one departs from a simple apprehension of certain definite commandments one may become absorbed in the excitement of a spiritual drama for its own sake."<sup>1</sup>

His fascination with his own pseudo-spiritual drama leads him to ignore the needs and presence of Nick, his former lover, while his self-deceit precipitates an involve-

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Bell, pp. 206 - 207



ment with Toby which could have been disastrous. He reflects with guilt on his selfishness and ultimately his lack of love for the other:-

"Nick had needed love, and he ought to have given him what he had to offer, without fears about its imperfections. If he had had more faith he would have done so, not calculating either Nick's faults or his own. .... Wretchedly Michael forced himself to remember the occasions on which Nick had appealed to him since he came to Imber, and how on every occasion Michael had denied him. Michael had concerned himself with keeping his own hands clean, his own future secure, when instead he should have opened his heart: should impetuously and devotedly and beyond all reason have broken the alabaster cruse of very costly ointment."<sup>1</sup>

The characterization of Dora and Michael rests on acute psychological insight and justifies Iris Murdoch's insistence on the need for respect for the individual, and thus enhances the novel's themes. Her awareness of the part played in their crises by their sexual appetites and nature renders the studies even more cogent. The knowledge of man's physical nature and its juxtaposition to the moral

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1    *ibid*, p. 311

and religious ensures that her investigation of the moral is intelligent and far-reaching. Michael, the homosexual, as he himself dimly realizes, is the victim of insufficiently objectified appetites; desires, moreover, which are intertwined with his religion in an obscure and dangerous way.

"It scarcely occurred to him that his religion could establish any quarrel with his sexual habits. Indeed, in some curious way the emotion which fed both arose deeply from the same source, and some vague awareness of this kept him from a more minute reflection."<sup>1</sup>

Michael's undirected and indiscriminated emotionalism plunges him into escapades with Nick and, partially, with Toby Gashe which a clearer-sighted or more cautious individual would avoid. Iris Murdoch portrays him as submerging any real knowledge of his homosexuality, refusing to allow such self-insight to inform his actions. His procedure is evasive and self-exculpatory; so that the deep irony emerges that an individual with a "vocation" indulges in appetites contrary to the dictates of his religion.

Miss Murdoch's purpose in portraying the ambiguity at the heart of Michael's nature is not to criticize homosexuality, nor even to undercut religious values by her

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1    *ibid*, p. 100

Freudian insights, but rather to show the disjunction between moral rules and absolutes and man; the problems experienced by those who would attain to higher things. She is as aware as George Eliot of the difficult nature of goodness, of barriers to disinterested, rationally directed behaviour; and Michael's character, founded as it is on inner insight and a degree of objective observation moves in the spirit of the portrayal of Lydgate and Dorothea.

I have suggested that The Bell's plot reveals joint guilt on Michael and Dora's part for the death of Nick Fawley, the breakdown of his sister, Catherine, the collapse of the community; and it is only by good fortune that Toby Gashe emerges unscathed from their hands. Some responsibility must be shared by other members of the brethren, too. Iris Murdoch discloses that the sanctimoniousness of Mrs. Mark, the exclusiveness of the sect, their inability to label Dora as anything other than the "erring wife" help to impel the latter on her witch's course. While James' stiff condemnation of Nick as just another "pansy", the siting of the latter in a cottage at the edge of the grounds encourages his feeling of isolation; and when Michael evades him and, worse, appears interested in Toby, he is pushed to suicide. Michael and Dora are catalysts, as it were, for communal error; the former's self-deception and blindness, the latter's uneasy sense of her rôle explode the smouldering passions and conflicting needs and desires at Imber.



Ironically, both the religious and the irreligious are dangerous and deadly moral agents; and only disaster enables them to achieve self-enlightenment. In the random and contingent world which Iris Murdoch envisages, chance assumes an overwhelming importance.<sup>1</sup> Again like George Eliot, she is implacably aware that acts have consequences, that a chain of causation exists, though those who suffer may well be the innocent, or the passers-by.

The Bell would therefore not seem to support uncritically or unequivocally either the instinctive or the religious approach to life; absolutes do not help Michael, while appetite unchecked by values involves Dora in a dreary cul-de-sac. But Iris Murdoch does not negate the importance of either attitude; and possibly the nuns in the enclosed order epitomize an aspect of her viewpoint. Plot contrivance ensures that Mother Clare rescues Catherine from potential suicide (Dora has attempted rescue but cannot swim); the Abbess urges Michael that imperfect love must be made perfect, "the way is forward not back", a view which Iris Murdoch's philosophical essays constantly stress. The nuns, in their lively, unselfconscious way appear to have achieved a balanced outlook on life.

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 79

Obedience to rules, forgetfulness of self releases their potential and their wisdom. Their creator is sympathetically aware that prayer and attention to God are a source of "often good" energy.<sup>1</sup> That is not to suggest, however, that she advocates celibacy and religious enclosure as a prelude to goodness - the nuns are clearly a special case, with symbolic as well as naturalistic significance. She sees many roads to the Good; but in general she appears to feel that instinct must be harnessed to reason and values before man can turn outwards and relate fruitfully to his fellows.

Michael is an early demonstration and exposure of the disease of consciousness, an ancestor of many characters who deform events and cause disaster by their obsessive concern with their own patterning of existence. The Murdochian universe is one in which a strict equipoise needs to be maintained between self-awareness and self-absorption, between seeing oneself as an agent, and an actor in a stimulating drama: A Severed Head contains an early warning of the dangers of such gratuitous rôle-playing, while A Fairly Honourable Defeat demonstrates its calamitous results.

Catherine Fawley in The Bell, a study of the dividing line between vocation and neurosis, provides an instructive

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1 see pg.249

parallel to Michael's self-deceit, only in her case, pressure is exerted by the needs and assumptions of others to force her into the rôle too "high" for her. She is the community's "little saint", embracing her vocation because it is destined. Dora alone senses her strain and alerts the reader to her potential breakdown; she is able to see Catherine plainly and spontaneously, while the others have made little or no attempt to imagine her feelings, slotting her neatly into a pre-existent category, committing the generalizing and abstracting sin decried in Under the Net. It is clear, too, that they receive power and satisfaction of some sort from the notion of Catherine's vocation. They "use" her mentally and psychically in a way which is demonstrably dangerous. A slight sketch, she also conveys Iris Murdoch's awareness that acceptance of and adjustment to man's physical nature is a necessary prerequisite to balanced living. Catherine embraces her vocation to escape the needs and dictates of her sexuality; she then falls in love with Michael and sees the accident with the bell as a divine sign of her "sinfulness". She cannot accept or come to terms with her own physical desires, and the result for her is breakdown, the escalation of her neurosis.

I have argued that Miss Murdoch considers self-honesty and self-knowledge as the necessary pre requisite for moral behaviour, using Dora and Michael as examples of self-confusion and deceit, while Jake exemplified the working up



of existence, the lack of adherence to a proper objectivity. Further examples in later fiction abound; a novel like A Fairly Honourable Defeat appears to be partially devoted to showing that everyone gets everything wrong, while the form of The Black Prince flirts constantly with the ambiguity of existence. It is clear that a close correlation exists between Miss Murdoch's view of life and fiction and her practice; these novels demonstrate simultaneously the "opacity of persons" and the individual's temptation to "deform" existence by fantasy. Thus they are extremely moral in intent, since they aim to demonstrate and restore to the reader a proper view of life and people as dark and difficult to comprehend, and to underline the dangers of our instinctively self-protecting approach to the world. Now I should like to add some comments on her handling of what I term set pieces, since they demonstrate her view of "the solidity of the normal", respect for which is again essential if the individual is to be partial master of his world.

Critics early observed in Iris Murdoch's fiction a tendency to halt the course of the novel at certain points in order to dwell on the description or manipulation of an object. One example of this occurs in The Sandcastle, where Mor causes Rain's car to skid on the river bank. Despite their precise and energetic attempts at rescue, it gradually heels over into the river.<sup>1</sup> The episode, part-

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Sandcastle, 1957, pp. 94 - 99

icularly the passage which begins, "Very, very slowly the big car was tilting towards the water ....." is rendered with an attention to detail and an exactitude which is almost scientific. It stands out in the novel; and one returns to it as an earnest of power, and because it contains its own particular brand of puzzling interest.

In The Bell, there is a similar episode in Toby and Dora's efforts to raise the old bell from the lake bed; an episode which is connected in mood and temper with Dora's later vision of the bell shortly before she sounds it at night. When they first view the bell, it is pictured as both solid and mysterious, emerging from an element over which man has seldom had much control.

"The bell lay upon its side, the black hole of its mouth still jagged with mud. Its outer surface, much encrusted with watery growths and shell-like incrustations, was a brilliant green. It lay there, gaping and enormous, and they looked at it in silence. It was a thing from another world."<sup>1</sup>

Later, Dora is awed by the bell's mystery and power. She sees it as "huge and portentous, motionless with its own weight". It seems to her to be alive, a sentient being; and she looks with reverence at the carvings on its rim.

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Bell, p. 222

"The squat figures faced her from the sloping surface of the bronze, solid, simple, beautiful, absurd, full to the brim with something which was to the artist not an object of speculation or imagination."<sup>1</sup>

I would link these passages with a further one in The Bell, previously quoted, where Dora goes to visit the National Gallery and encounters, with similar reverence, the painting by Gainsborough; and with Hugh's attention to his Tintoretto in An Unofficial Rose. There is a connection too with the description of the Bronzino painting in The Nice and the Good, though at this later stage in her work, Iris Murdoch makes the scene less static, its texture more normal, so that it fits more comfortably into the fabric of the book.

There is obviously in all these descriptions an area of significance which it is difficult to uncover. Iris Murdoch herself suggested to Professor Kermode that they were a piece of "self-indulgence" on her part; but they are a little more than that.<sup>2</sup> They are linked with her obsession with the stuff of life, her apprehension of matter.

Antonia Byatt remarks that the episode with the car in The Sandcastle "is a symbol for the intractability of matter,

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1 *ibid*, p. 270

2 Frank Kermode, "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists", pp. 115-116. Reprinted in The Novel Today, ed. Malcolm Bradbury.

~~2 Antonia Byatt, *op. cit.*, p. 65~~



of the normal, against which one's efforts are unavailing, no matter how violent."<sup>1</sup> The bell is symbolic in a comparable fashion; for its solidity is constantly stressed. The paintings however, are meaningful in a slightly different way, as the comments on Dora's experience in The National Gallery and those on the inseparable connection which Iris Murdoch sees between art and morals will have shown. Though the fact of their presence is underlined, their beauty and achievement is most relevant. They are examples of what man can do at his best: as well as being objects which confirm the existence of an objective universe, they exemplify man's higher aims; what can be achieved through art and unself-regarding love. They are an earnest of man's desire for the Good, and evidence of the moral discipline of the artist who is, "in respect of his work, a good man".<sup>2</sup>

These scenes have a peculiar power beyond the justifications suggested above, however, since their author is a person whose apprehension of things is at times poetically vivid. In "Nostalgia for the Particular", she remarks,

"Much of our experience is poor and thin, but some of it is rich and pregnant in the way described; and there is a use of the word 'symbolic' which covers just this sense of structure and extended

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1 Antonia Byatt, op. cit., p. 65

2 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 64

meaning being given in immediate experience."<sup>1</sup>

This vision links her, perhaps surprisingly, with a writer like James Joyce and his epiphanies, and with that aspect of Virginia Woolf's work where objects seem to glow with a fresh and striking presence, achieving thereby almost a new dimension. It is not my brief here to investigate the reasons behind the strange power in such writing; but a quotation from an essay by Professor Kermode suggests a fruitful line of enquiry.

"With man the position is less simple; but there exists a biological community of images, shared 'stereotypes' which react to a fixed sign stimuli. For many of these sleeping images - since they are as vestigial as the vermiform appendix - nature provides no 'releasers'; but art may do so."<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, Miss Murdoch may achieve a proper and spontaneous sense of the mystery of life; she goes through theory to celebrate the actual. To embody the world in its givenness and to encourage one's readers to do so too, seems to me to be an achievement of some magnitude; and I would like to suggest it is a moral feat, for it moves in the direction of truth.

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1 Iris Murdoch, "Nostalgia for the Particular", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1952, vol. 52, p. 258

2 Frank Kermode, Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews 1958 - 1961, 1962, p. 44

### Morality and Relationships

If the individual can only see himself truly in relation to "realities which transcend him", the testing ground for moral behaviour is the human relationship, particularly the sexual relationship. Turning away from the philosophical and aesthetic investigation of Under the Net, Professor Bradbury correctly detects Iris Murdoch's fascination with the "novel of sentiment"; and she herself argues that love is now her subject.

"No, I think love is my main subject. I have very mixed feelings about the concept of freedom now. This is partly a philosophical development. I once was a kind of existentialist and now I am a kind of platonist."<sup>1</sup>

Much critical attention, not all of it complimentary, has been devoted to the way in which her interest in love emerges in her fiction as a pre-occupation with the mechanics of sex; so that in almost every novel, one has come to expect extraordinary sexual permutations and surprises. W. K. Rose went on to enquire about the preponderance of sexual entanglements in her work. Miss Murdoch replied,

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<sup>1</sup> W. K. Rose, "Iris Murdoch, informally", The London Magazine, June, 1968, p. 68



"I think sex does these things in life. Part of the drama in those closed-up, rather obsessional novels is the struggle between love and sex ..... the kind of opening out of love as a world where we really can see other people and are not simply dominated by our own slavish impulses and obsessions, this is something which I would want very much to explore and which I think is very difficult."<sup>1</sup>

She creates an opposition between love and sex which correlates with her obsession on openness and respect for the autonomy of others and the impulse to theory or abstraction. The demands of sex are seen as corrupt, mechanical and illegitimate; they are also anarchic, destructive of social codes and rational behaviour and frequently fatal in their ends. Confusion, both as to the love object and the nature of the ill which assails them is endemic to her characters; and from The Flight from the Enchanter to The Black Prince the pattern of confusion, attraction, repulsion, random pairings, unsatisfied loves and bizarre events holds, hardening in Professor Bradbury's words to "a convention", a largely symbolic embodiment of the firmly-held ethical views, which were discussed in the first section of this chapter. The strange and exaggerated atmosphere of some

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1    *ibid*, p. 69

of these works, where even naturalistic fiction, as in The Nice and the Good or An Accidental Man is embraced for theoretical purposes, does not always aid exegesis; so that I concentrate initially on her handling of relationships in The Sandcastle, an early and sober novel, for the sake of clarity. It also provides a useful touchstone for the later work.

The Sandcastle is an underrated novel, which now appears clear and quietly good in its accurate examination of the pains and perils of love, and the difficulty of behaving well to others. Its form is simple; a naturalistic love story, with some symbolical patternings (to which I shall later refer). This traditional shape allows Miss Murdoch scope in her close attention to the detail of inner debate; and she is reminiscent of George Eliot in her scrutiny of the see-saw of Mor's feelings and conscience. Indeed in her obvious interest in the grit of specific situations, an interest manifested later in the portrayal of Michael Meade, or Ducane in The Nice and the Good, for example, she can be contrasted with Graham Greene and Muriel Spark, for the former sees human dilemma in relation to eternal certainty, while the latter habitually employs it for wit or poetry. In this respect, Iris Murdoch works within a central tradition of English fiction, though even at this early stage of her development, she transmutes that

tradition with her distinctively speculative and open-ended approach.

Confidently she details her protagonist's character, revealing William Mor partially through interaction with his wife, Demoyte, and other characters; but also not shrinking initially from direct authorial commentary which reveals his flaws clearly. Mor's earnestness, his difficult relationship with his abominable wife, his desire to be more than he is, provide fertile ground for his coup de grace at the hands of Rain Carter; and by a nice stroke of art, his omission of his primary virtue, the telling of truth, completes his downfall. Miss Murdoch hints at the weakness of ethics in the face of strong inner, if undiscriminated, desires.

Mor's relationship with his wife and family is cogently and concretely rendered; at this stage of her career, Iris Murdoch cannot be accused of a lack of contact with the immediate. Nan's "predatory fork" hovering over Mor's left-over food is a convenient symbol of their marriage, which appears to have degenerated naturalistically to a locked conflict of some dourness. He is critical of her sardonic stance to existence, yet recognizes in her no mean opponent, a stronger personality than his own and a threatening intimation of the other.



"He told himself that her strength sprang only from obstinate and merciless unreason; but to think this did not save him either from suffering coercion or from feeling resentment. He could not now make his knowledge of her into love, he could not even make it into indifference. In the heart of him he was deeply compelled. He was forced. And he was continually offended."<sup>1</sup>

Yet sympathetic as Iris Murdoch is to Mor, his virtues and ambitions, she indicates that he is not without his own vices, and intimates that he evades Nan's clear insight with self-protective cunning. She appears to have a more "realistic" idea of their children's needs and desires (certainly she claims to have); and the novel supports her view of Don, if not of Felicity. But her dogmatism, her continual insistence that Mor should be more down-to-earth is seen as limiting and narrow; and while her judgement of her husband - "'You imagine that it's only my narrowmindedness that stops you from being Prime Minister'"<sup>2</sup> - has substance, she is herself an unsatisfied person, though her creator's irony allows her to hedge that concept with a lack of self-awareness or self-criticism on Nan's part.

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sandcastle, 1960, p. 10

2 *ibid*, p. 14

Existence for Mor has deteriorated to the exercise of constraint and caution; and while he is a good school master, the book conveys an authentic sense of time suspended. His political ambitions hold fire; his book on political concepts does not progress since he has so little "spare time". One recognizes in him the human and its self-protecting mechanisms.

The gradual elision into a "situation" with Rain is carefully narrated; and once Mor has lied, not by omission but commission over the wrecking of the car, his author demonstrates that the way is open for other sins - a lack of attention to his work, callousness to his wife, and, more fundamentally, his children. Blaise in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine pursues a similar rake's progress; and while Miss Murdoch omits to comment overtly on his derelictions from duty, they have weight in the fiction and contribute to the reader's view of Mor.

Initially, Mor sees Rain as an oddity, an individual whose solecisms cause dismay and embarrassment (tears at lunch, skipping like an adolescent, trying out Bledyard's bed). Ironically, his annoyance at the latter escapade and his apprehension that "someone" might misconstrue the situation opens the way for their affair; his starchiness is a revelation to the reader (but not to himself) of his inner desires. These are portrayed, when they do finally emerge, as crippling - "a dolorous pain", whose cause to

Mor could, initially, even be physical. He has "an agonizing wish to see Miss Carter again, to see her soon, to see her now".<sup>1</sup> Like so many other inhabitants of the Murdochian universe, his collapse at the onset of eros is total. He now becomes obsessive about Rain; he must see her, possess her and abandon his loveless marriage. The psyche propels itself mechanically on its self-energizing path.

Yet, powerful as this urge is, it is not represented as without agony and distress. A lesser novelist would have twinkled Mor and Rain into bed, and allowed their subsequent ecstasy to mute any pain in their escape from the constraints of custom and conformity. Yet Iris Murdoch is constant both to her view of Mor and to her steady knowledge that man is an animal who does not instantly forget old relationships and forge new ones. Consequently, Mor's love is as painful as it is pleasurable; he recognizes that he harms his family; he fears that he may diminish Rain's potential as an artist, and yet he cannot evade its intolerable grip. He is thus the ancestor of innumerable Murdoch characters whom Aphrodite transfixes with one shaft, while simultaneously devastating their lives.

Mor's mind is "diseased"; he clings to existence only through the iron restraint of habit; his sensitivity

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1    *ibid*, p. 122



makes him unbearably aware of the "grotesque violence and unnatural crimes" of the world which surrounds him. His old easy security in concepts like "freedom", "responsibility", "goodness" is shattered. The reader realizes that these were, for him, largely abstractions not fleshed out by experience and knowledge, concepts untried and untested by human savagery and passion. Mor has clearly never had the sense so vital to an inhabitant of the Murdochian universe, and indeed to the inhabitant of any moral universe, that values are a net at best to catch what they can of human anarchy and disorder. In his schoolmasterly fashion (and I find this a sure touch of art!) he has imagined that rules are enough.

His agony is compounded by the knowledge that Rain has ceased to paint, and that her portrait of Demoyte may be less good than it could be. She cannot repaint the head because she is reduced to a similar "frenzy" to his own. In Chapter Fifteen he awaits her arrival at Waterloo Station; and the description of his confusion and mental misery prefigures the portraits of Dora and Michael in The Bell and indeed of heroes as late as that of A Word Child. His thoughts grind inexorably through his head; but though they reveal certain truths to him, they are enervating, masochistic and destructive. The unpalatable fact is that the calm, reasonable Mor of the book's commencement is gone.

His author reveals his virtues and failings, and by a careful and most cogent account of his reflections, indicates the subsequent plot of the novel. Rain is not yet his mistress.

"She herself had wished to. But Mor had decided that it was better to wait a little while until the situation had become clearer. Time passed, the situation did not become clearer, and Mor began to conjecture that just this delay might be his fatal error. But it was some lingering puritanism out of his rejected childhood which still made him hesitate to become in the final and technical sense unfaithful to his wife."<sup>1</sup>

Demoyte's subsequent judgement of Mor as a "coward and fool" is corroborated by this self-analysis; and Mor's insight that he and truth have now parted company "irrevocably", and that to break from Nan he must employ his vices as well as his good qualities, alerts the reader to the collapse of the affair. He must, he feels, keep the image of Rain steady if he is to win her; but he has already been shown as a character whose passion is held in check by reason and a sense of values. This caution, this need to think well of himself and stand well in the eyes of others, rather than Nan's revelation of his political ambitions at the dinner, destroys his relationship with Rain. Passion

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sandcastle, p. 232

is apparently not enough.

The struggle between Mor's conscience and his initially obscure desires is rendered naturalistically through immersing the reader in his consciousness; and the results of this identification are to involve the latter closely in estimating and judging the situation with, but slightly apart from Mor.<sup>1</sup> Thus the reader participates in what I should like to term the judgemental process; and enjoys a lively sense both of the immediacy of the problem and its difficulty. He realizes both the strength and potential of Mor's desire for Rain, and the contrary pull of his sense of duty towards and affection for his family. The continuing needs, plans and actions of his wife and children run like a counterpoint to his infatuation; his insensitive treatment of his son's ambitions is a grace note to his great "love". By implication, to love properly is to be alert to the actuality of all others. Mor's case points to the delusive share of sex. Miss Murdoch resolves her fiction in traditional fashion; exposure comes, ironically, when Mor and Rain imagine they are safe (and worse, when they are not technically guilty lovers); and realization of the effects of their love is brought about, slightly melodramatically, but with effect, by means of the

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1 see for example The Sandcastle, p. 92 and pp. 108 - 109



danger to Donald, Mor's son. By her account of the suffering of Mor's family, their author demonstrates the inexorable nature of the moral law; with something of George Eliot's clarity, she discloses that acts have consequences, that individual behaviour can, indeed must, offend and trouble others. It is a sober conclusion; and the novel's resolution, the resumption of married life, is sobering too. The author offers no clue to future possibilities except that Mor will try for Parliament; romantically Rain fades off into the sunset as the novel itself escapes into romantic convention.

But such an account might suggest that The Sandcastle is purely a love story, lacking the moral emphasis argued. Certain of the novel's facets work against this interpretation, however, underlining a moral concern and a desire for "significance" which the author finds compulsive. Frank Baldanza has referred to Iris Murdoch's tendency to cover all aspects of her work with significance, to pattern characters, fable and scene to contribute to a total meaning.<sup>1</sup> Though The Sandcastle is overtly naturalistic, it is not without this attribute, and symbolic signposts are planted to direct the reader on. The most notable of these are the symbolic characterization of Rain Carter, and the employment of the gipsy, Felicity's "familiar", "an

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1 Frank Baldanza, "Iris Murdoch and the Theory of Personality", Criticism, Spring 1965, vol. 7, pp. 176 - 189

image for Rain's other 'gipsy' self, that which endangered her relationship with Mor".<sup>1</sup> The flimsiness and vulgarity of the former (Rain is to bring fresh life to Mor, and is often accompanied by sympathetic weather in best novelette fashion) is matched by the puzzling nature of the latter. Rain, as Antonia Byatt observes, is an idealization of a rich, successful young painter, a personification of Mor's wish-fulfilment, rather than the solid presence the book requires. What place Felicity's magic and the gipsy are intended to occupy in the "open" novel, one can work out, but the effort is disproportionate to the reward. The reader is left aware that they contribute to some sort of generally conceived meaning, but lacking guidance or impetus to interpretation.

Much more successful in establishing the moral climate of the novel are Mor's self-scrutiny and the characterization of Demoyte, his successor, Evvy, and Bledyard. Mor speculates on the "goodness" of these men, and the link between their characters and their religious faith. They are also allowed explicit commentary on the theme of the moral, "Evvy" by means of his sermon, and Bledyard through his comments on art.

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1 Antonia Byatt, Degrees of Freedom, at the foot of p. 63

The contrasted portraits of Demoyte and Evvy contribute clearly to the investigation of the nature of goodness, since the former is agnostic, caustic, critical, the latter "good" and obedient to the dictates of his faith. Yet the former inspires strong fidelity and love, while the latter causes nothing stronger than mild irritation. Demoyte is an achieved character, capable himself of loving Rain, alert to the potential of life. Evvy, by contrast, is insipid and emasculated; the implication is, perhaps, that personality and vigour have been eclipsed and pressed down in the cause of rules harmful to the whole man. But Miss Murdoch's conclusions on the subject are strictly conditional.

The characterization of Bledyard is an interesting grace note to the theme of goodness, and by means of it, the author links the concepts of goodness and form, one of her primary preoccupations as the comments on Under the Net and her philosophical views indicated. Bledyard sees art as moral in intent, measuring the greatness of artists in direct proportion to their "truthfulness". He believes in objectivity and fidelity to the facts of existence, asserting,

"When confronted with an object which is not a human being, we must of course treat it reverently. We must, if we paint it, attempt to show what it is like in itself and not treat it as a symbol of our



own moods and wishes. The great painter the great painter<sup>x</sup> is he who is humble enough in the presence of the object to attempt merely to show what the object is like. But this merely in painting is everything'."<sup>1</sup>

His views patently link with those of his creator<sup>2</sup>; yet Bledyard is a strange and fundamental Christian who has applied a further twist to the Murdochian respect for contingency and the individual. He believes that the human face is sacred, made in the image of God; to paint it at all is to lack reverence, and consequently, he has ceased to paint. A bumbling absurd character, he yet possesses, as Mor detects, some kind of moral authority; and when he criticizes the latter for his involvement with Rain, Mor is forced to recognize the truth of some of his assertions. Bledyard makes an equation between art and goodness, echoing his creator's notion that the artist is the analogue of the good man, who through love lets his creatures be. He suggests that the greatest art seeks for "the truth", and that an artist can only paint what he is, sin being a diminishment which prevents proper objectivity and vision. His comments, while often comically and irritatingly put, are interesting; and while it is possibly disappointing that aspects of Iris Murdoch's beliefs are rendered in the mouth of an absurd character, they do make

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x Bledyard has a stammer

1 Iris Murdoch, The Sandcastle, 1957, p. 77

2 see for example "On 'God' and 'Good'", pp. 64 - 65

The Sandcastle a tougher novel, and, as I have suggested, possess a queer power, which stimulates reflection on the part of the reader.

A similar speculation on the nature of human goodness emerges strongly in Iris Murdoch's later fiction; the characterization of Ann in An Unofficial Rose, the Abbess in The Bell, Hannah in The Unicorn provide examples, while The Nice and the Good seems devoted to the categorizing of sheep and goats, or the sorting out of those who are merely pleasant from those with the power to be good and possibly do good. Miss Murdoch's conclusions on the subject appear largely conditional; there is sympathy for those who hold simple allegiance to rules, acting without self-consciousness or even reflection like James in The Bell, while Ann's goodness is admired because it is "shapeless and awkward".

Douglas Swann comments:-

"Shapeless and awkward. Precisely. We must not expect our lives to have a visible shape. They are invisibly shaped by God. Goodness accepts the contingent. Love accepts the contingent. Nothing is more fatal to love than to want everything to have form."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, An Unofficial Rose, 1962, p. 134

If such admiration appears to contradict the contention that Miss Murdoch sees self-awareness as the necessary premise to moral behaviour, then I think it does; for while I believe this is her own view, she is prepared to entertain other possibilities in her fiction, refusing to comment finally on what she sees to be true in the cause of non-dogmatism, or freedom. She believes, too, that there are many possible roads to the good, and that one moral temperament can diverge radically from another,<sup>1</sup> an insight which often finds a moving and interesting embodiment in the novels.

In An Accidental Man, for example, Ludwig Leferrier is locked throughout the course of the novel within the dilemma of his evasion of his duties as an American citizen. Like many other young men, he has torn up his draft card for the war in Vietnam and chosen exile as a scholar in England. Yet he is haunted by thoughts of the war "of high explosive and napalm and people killed and maimed"<sup>2</sup>; and his conscience reminds him perpetually of the suffering he must have caused his parents by his action. His relationship with the kitten-like but formidable Gracie inevitably complicates the issue; and he agonizes, proliferating a mixture of self-excuse and sound reasoning like many another Murdoch character and, it must be added, the reader.

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 45

2 Iris Murdoch, An Accidental Man, 1975, p. 11



"The war was a piece of absolute wickedness in which he would take no part. He would not fight for the United States of America in that war. But neither was it his task to make politics, to shout and speechify and martyr himself. I am not a political animal, he told himself repeatedly. He was a scholar. He would not waste his talents. He would stay in England, where by a pure and felicitous accident he had been born, and take part in the long old conversation of Europe. To regret that his role was in so many ways an easy one was purely sentimental."<sup>1</sup>

Later, he attempts to clarify his motives; but quarrels with Gracie, and the complication of Dorina's flight scarcely aid him. He becomes absorbed in a miasma of misery to such a degree that when he sees the missing Dorina in the street by chance, he feels "no spring of interest in her, he almost felt resentment at seeing her now".<sup>2</sup> At the moment of crisis, of appeal or potential appeal, he turns aside in self-preoccupation. One is reminded of the situation of Michael and Nick in The Bell, or of Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, where

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1    ibid, p. 13

2    ibid, p. 362

her last desperate petition to Edgar is gently turned aside while he pursues what proves to be the illusory presence of Monty.<sup>1</sup>

Ludwig passes Dorina in silence, paralyzed by despair, with the result that she dies "accidentally", when his intervention might have proved fruitful. It was potentially a moment for what Iris Murdoch terms "grace". He might have performed an act which would have released "psychic energies which can be released in no other way ..... an unforeseen reward for a fumbling half-hearted act: a place for the idea of grace."<sup>2</sup> Eventually he writes to Gracie of his decision to return to America, not because he does not love her but "It is just that I am not in my right place in the universe." He seeks "a completeness .... elsewhere" which, if it eludes him, will entail his utter failure "as a man".<sup>3</sup>

His subsequent conversations with Matthew expose the very complex tissue of thought and motive which has engendered his act. It is impossible to speak of "the reason" for his return to America, but it arises from an obscure desire to "bear witness", a notion that because the world is as it is, choice is removed from him: the situation

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, 1976, pp. 303 - 304

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 43

3 Iris Murdoch, An Accidental Man, p. 401

itself determines his course. Thoughts of self-concern and self-interest eventually do not arise for Ludwig.<sup>1</sup> He is thus in the situation which his author outlined in "The Idea of Perfection" where "if I attend properly I will have no choices", which is "the ultimate condition to be aimed at."<sup>2</sup>

Matthew watches him entranced. He is himself a man who has attempted throughout his life to attain some sort of wisdom, a man of some spiritual insight and ambition. Yet the experience of Ludwig helps to teach him, among other things, that he is a mediocre man who will never be a hero. That poignant scene he once witnessed in the Red Square when "the solitary conscientious Russian .... had walked over to join the protestors and to shake their hands"<sup>3</sup>, an act which possibly blighted his life, must remain for Matthew an earnest of the good, a moving but obscure force only. He will never achieve true enlightenment. "Neither the longer way nor the shorter way was for him. He would be until the end of his life a man looking forward to his next drink."<sup>4</sup>

1    *ibid*, pp. 433 - 434

2    Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 40

3    Iris Murdoch, An Accidental Man, p. 440

4    *ibid*, p. 441



As Monty cruelly comments to Harriet when she consults him in her final agony over Blaise's defection,

"The whole situation holds you emotionally and morally trapped ..... it is your duty to help him [Blaise]. It mightn't be another woman's duty. It is yours!"<sup>1</sup>

The moral act, the moral imperative arises for the individual out of what he is and has been, out of the tissue of his affections and aims. He ignores it to his cost. For some, like Ludwig and Harriet, it is necessary to try to be a saint, however "peevish", while for others, like Matthew and Edgar, to contemplate goodness and abstain from active harm must perhaps be sufficient.

I turn now to consider more fully Iris Murdoch's treatment of morality and relationships in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine. This novel appears to be largely patterned around two nexi; first, Miss Murdoch's own ideas on the quasi mechanical nature of the psyche and, secondly, Titian's painting, "Amor Sacro e Profano", from the Villa Borghese, Rome, a detail of which appears on the Penguin edition of the novel. It also contains a very extensive and powerful investigation of what I can only term the process of morality in the characterization of Harriet. This seems to me one of the most skilled and moving embodi-

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 271

ments of Iris Murdoch's view that the moral task is endless and hard, and that being good is by no means the isolated act of<sup>a</sup>/brave naked will.

Her concept of the self-energizing, self-protecting psyche, with its often irresistible patterns of behaviour will, I hope, by now be clear; but I should like to devote a little more attention to the painting and its significance, since it seems to me that its presence was important to Miss Murdoch in the genesis of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Titian's representation of two women, one clothed, the other naked, who are seated on a sarcophagus against a landscape background has not always been known as "Sacred and Profane Love", though it has generally been acknowledged that the work has symbolic overtones. At one stage, it was called "Beauty Adorned and Unadorned", at another "Donna Divina e Profana", while interpretations of its significance varied. In 1930, an art critic named Panofsky suggested that the two women represent twin Venuses; the nude woman on the right of the picture is the goddess of love, the celestial Venus; the clothed woman is the earthly Venus, who stands for the generative forces of nature. A later critic, Walter Friedlaender, concentrated on the scene on the sarcophagus itself, which he saw as the representation of Mars whipping

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1 I am indebted to Harold E. Wethey, The Paintings of Titian, vol. III, 1975, for the information that follows.

Adonis for his affair with Venus, while she stands by. Others have suggested that the picture "fuses pagan eroticism with Christian symbolism"<sup>1</sup>, providing a reconciliation of the sacred and profane. More recently, Charles de Tolnay has inferred that the nude woman is Venus, the clothed figure, Chastity. The landscape to the right of Venus signifies two kinds of love; pastoral love, exemplified by the amorous couple, and religious love, which is symbolized by the church steeple in the background. Chastity's character, however, is reinforced by the steep landscape and fortified tower on the hill at her back.

I should not wish to suggest more than that this painting and aspects of its interpretation were in Iris Murdoch's mind when she conceived this novel. Any attempt to equate too exactly Harriet with Chastity, or Emily with the celestial Venus, for example, would not seem appropriate; but some of the versions put forward above are suggestive in unravelling Blaise's relationship with the two women; and he does, at several points, as I hope to show, think of them specifically as his "sacred and profane" loves. I think, too, that Titian's painting, which has also been seen in terms of Neoplatonic symbolism, has a bearing on the character and experience of Montague Small who attempts some sort of metaphysical communion within the novel, an entry into the

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1    *ibid*, p. 179



transcendent. This difficult notion, I shall return to later.

The title of the novel perhaps implies that one should begin any discussion of it by an examination of the characters of Harriet and Emily. But dependent as Blaise is upon them both, and though he is, in many ways, a lesser figure than either of them, it seems necessary to begin with him, since he largely initiates the tortured dance in which all three become involved, and is deeply responsible for the mechanical and repetitive patterns of behaviour which later embroil them. It is no accident that Iris Murdoch has selected the eternal triangle as her plot for this late novel, nor that Blaise is experienced in psychology and is a self-trained psychiatrist. William Mor, involved in a similar predicament in The Sandcastle, perhaps had some excuse for his blindness to his own motives and behaviour. Blaise's profession would seem to obviate such ignorance; but the novel neatly reveals that self-knowledge is no clue to the labyrinth of desire and selfishness in which he is lost. He can "explain" himself, Emily and Harriet with a certain superficial glibness; but a real insight into the constants of their situation is lacking; and he will not act since, despite traumatic guilt, au fond he desires and works for the best of both worlds. While the concepts of morality and freedom retain for him an "unassimilable awkwardness" which sometimes makes

him feel he lives "in a world ..... of comfortable illusion"<sup>1</sup>, he is unable to make proper use of them. He is thus, for Iris Murdoch, an alienated man, disturbingly cut off from those tools which would enable him to make sense of and cope with his situation.

When Emily begins, increasingly, to kick savagely at what she regards as her inferior status, Blaise is torn between "alternating exasperation and euphoria".<sup>2</sup> He is irritated by thoughts that he and Emily have outlived their first ecstatic rapture, that they have somehow to move on in a way which is not clear to him. He reflects jealously on the acceptance of man's polygamous nature by other ages and societies. At the same time, however, he experiences an unholy glee at his "getting away with it"; he sees himself as a fabulous figure "a sort of interiorized Atlas, holding the two ends of the earth apart by sheer strength".<sup>3</sup> Later, both annoyance and elation give way to a despairing sense of muddle; for there appears no way out of the mess, except by his death.

Blaise's psychic incarceration is exacerbated both by his sense of guilt and by his real feeling for Emily and Harriet. Often he is consumed by the sense of his own sinfulness; and resents bitterly the loss of his

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 22

2 *ibid*, p. 80

3 *ibid*, pp. 80 - 81

virtue. He feels condemned to play an alien rôle, that of "an ordinary thuggish homme moyen sensuel"<sup>1</sup>, while all the time he is conscious of his "real" inner goodness. He cannot act well because he has been forced into this miserable part. His author comments wryly that "In fact he had not slipped into it either accidentally or unwillingly. He had rushed into it with cries of joy";<sup>2</sup> though she softens that tartness by allowing Blaise the dignity of remembering his fall, sometimes with agony, and sometimes consolation.

When the novel opens, his marriage to Harriet, the poor "Mrs. Placid" of Emily's wit, has been for ten years a happy one. It is open and fulfilled, both in their union and in the birth of David, with whom Blaise has enjoyed a natural, unstrained relationship. Blaise first responded to Harriet's "normality", and was, when he fell in love with her, intuitively aware of a kind of saintliness. Later he speculates that their union might have come about because of his tiny fear of his own inner fantasies; for with Harriet such absurdities, and their possibly disturbing implications, fade into insignificance. The setting and current of their life at Hood House is largely pleasant and untroubled; it provides Blaise with a refuge against Emily's tougher nature and environment, where he "switches off" his other self and its problems.

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1    *ibid*, p. 69

2    *ibid*, p. 69



But if Harriet deeply answers some of his needs and is in his view very much his lawful wife, Emily McHugh is his own kind. He has never envisaged a woman "who could so complement his own strangeness", and the ensuing communion is not just "intense sexual bliss, it was absolute metaphysical justification".<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch is not, however, merely attempting to describe the happy linking of one sexually bizarre temperament with another; for Blaise sees his early love as "the spiritualization of sensuality", which creates "its own truth and its own morality",<sup>2</sup> and the reader shares something of his veneration. His "glinting girl", Emily, becomes a goddess to him, an earnest of truth which illuminates the paucity of his former life. She is, in fact, a kind of Venus; and erotic love reaches out to the celestial.

Emily is also, as I have indicated, portrayed as a very human woman, with a powerfully developed sense of her own rights and needs which have understandably intensified after nine years in her solitary "love nest". She begins increasingly to challenge Blaise's vague promises that he will leave his wife eventually; and turns their relationship into a holocaust of quarrels and misery. Luca, the flat, her person are neglected. She herself suffers; but I think it is also clear that Emily is an enslaver who is determined to achieve her own ends, which explains the mutual mistrust which later springs up between her and

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1    *ibid*, p. 72

2    *ibid*, p. 79

Montague Small. For Blaise the situation becomes increasingly tortured; for as his "great love" for Emily is jeopardized by their periodic battles, so he realizes that the current of his love for Harriet has not been swept away but has "gone underground like a river" and is now "stronger and deeper and purer than it had ever been before".<sup>1</sup>

It is hardly surprising that it takes the eruption of Luca into the scene at Hood House and Monty's "advice" to release him from his paralysis. Coerced by circumstances, Blaise writes a letter to Harriet to tell her the truth; but it reveals more his desire to hold on to her and be thought well of by her than the situation as it is. His involvement with Emily he terms a "brief unworthy liaison".<sup>2</sup> He speaks of his suffering and shame. Emily is no longer attractive to him; and there was never "real" love between them "only a dreadful bondage, an involvement tormenting to me and exasperating to her".<sup>3</sup> He begs Harriet's forgiveness, desiring her not to reject him in his need, but to love him "more", since she is his saint and his angel.

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1    ibid, p. 84

2    ibid, p. 139

3    ibid, p. 140

4    ~~Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 142~~

Blaise has a real sense, in writing this letter, that he may be taking an irrevocable step; he is deeply afraid. Yet, ominous sign, he also experiences "zest"; he feels he is "fighting for his life".<sup>1</sup> Like the letter which Martin Lynch-Gibbon sends to Honor Klein after he has attacked her in A Severed Head, Blaise's missive is deceitful, and arises from a profound and manipulative knowledge of Harriet's psyche. His author's skilled prior unfolding of his predicament ironically exposes his "truth-telling" for what it is; it is one more link in the self-aggrandizing chain with which Blaise seeks to bind Harriet irrevocably to him. For until Harriet's death, Blaise repeatedly turns to her for succour, imitating the "mechanical" pattern of behaviour which first drew him to her. He never really escapes his vision of her as the stiller of demons, the one who will solve all and "let him off". She is not seen as human, fallible, or autonomous; her needs are subordinate to his.

Harriet's initially heroic response to his letter is exactly what Blaise desires. In the strange honeymoon period after his revelation, he goes about, as Emily acutely observes, like a cat with the cream. He has managed the situation in such a way as to keep them both. Edgar's drunken outburst at Harriet's "party", however, provokes

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 142



action; and Blaise chooses Emily with a decisiveness that looks like truthful behaviour at last. But "machine talk"<sup>1</sup> is instinctive to him. Just as he soothes Emily for years with promises of "faithfulness" and affectionate endearments, mechanically and propitiatingly uttered<sup>2</sup>, so he even now cannot surrender Harriet. He sends her another "effusion", which Harriet justifiably calls the letter of a "wicked man"<sup>3</sup>; but on this occasion she rejects his appeal, casting him into limbo.

Later, a further "mechanical" quarrel with Emily over Kiki St. Loy, in which they again deteriorate into two machines verbalizing the same wandering and pointless utterances, drives him to Hood House. He reflects that he cannot do it, that he must be let off the hook "and Harriet must let me off it. Yes, it all depends on Harriet, and if once she sees that she will help me."<sup>4</sup> But Harriet has fled with Luca to Germany and her tragic death; and the horror of that and his (one feels symbolic) mauling by her dogs leave Blaise a character aware of decreased resilience and vigour, an older man in many senses. He suffers from her loss; yet at the same time, a consistent survivor, will not give in to the "horror". That her accidental death should have freed him from his personal torment he sees, at first, as bitterly fortuitous. Later he determines to

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1    *ibid*, p. 91

2    see p. 95 for example

3    *ibid*, pp. 246 - 247

4    *ibid*, p. 328

ration his grief for her, and to use her death wisely, healing himself through his responsibilities to the living. Life has very terribly given him the opportunity of grace; and Blaise attempts to accept it.

The reader mourns with David the way in which his father and Emily destroy his mother's effects, "making her not to have been"<sup>1</sup>, and aligns this with Blaise's mental reordering of his personal history. The latter forgets "that transformation of his early affections which had made him feel that Harriet was his sacred love and Emily his profane", recalling only "his unhappiness with Harriet .... his sense of having made the wrong choice and being in the wrong place."<sup>2</sup> The reader is also aware, as David perhaps necessarily cannot be, of the psychological justification for these actions. David's harsh judgement of his father and stepmother, as "totally wicked"<sup>3</sup> is mitigated by Edgar's pleas for reconciliation. He urges that without David's gentleness they will "starve", and that bitterness will only consume and destroy. For David's inevitable suffering, he puts forward the idea of prayer. Just as the awful randomness of existence has possibly given Blaise a second chance for happiness, so prayer, making the mind quiet, may "help" David. The episode

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1    *ibid*, p. 349

2    *ibid*, p. 342

3    *ibid*, p. 350

provides a touching grace note to the novel, and suggests, fictionally, comfort for the human fear of transience, since Harriet demonstrably lives on in David who, despite the horror of his mother's death, can drink wine and discuss his sexual fantasies.

The preceding account of Blaise and the patterns of behaviour and thought in which he (and to a large extent, Emily) is trapped conveys, I hope, some sense of the cyclical nature of The Sacred and Profane Love Machine. The novel brilliantly suggests the inexorable way in which its characters grind round and round in largely fruitless modes of action, where outrageous acts, like Edgar's drunken behaviour at the party, instead of breaking the circuit, frequently only serve to send it into another gear. Yet Iris Murdoch is not a determinist; and despite her bleak insight into man's quasi mechanical nature, she provides glimpses of those aspects of life which can free man from the cycle. The chief of these is the characterization of Harriet, at which I shall now look.

I have suggested that Harriet is an embodiment of Iris Murdoch's view that the moral life goes on endlessly, and that a good act is not an isolated choice, or movement of will, but arises from a "fabric of being".<sup>1</sup> Yet she is by no means an idealized or unrealized character; and

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<sup>1</sup> see p. 247



Emily's taunt of "Mrs. Placid" has some cogency, for Harriet is, in many ways, ordinary, quiescent, almost dull; but, the qualification must be made, she is capable of moral growth, which grants her, in author and reader's eyes alike, stature and significance.

At the beginning of the novel, she is viewed, if not with irony, at least with an affectionate detachment. She dresses absurdly, indulges herself with chocolates, is a somewhat slovenly housewife, dotes sentimentally on her dogs, and yearns after her son in a way which arouses gentle amusement. Yet Harriet is not a fool, nor is she complacent. She is aware of her good fortune in her home, husband and son; "Life had been so terrifyingly generous to her"<sup>1</sup>; and if that awareness is initially not profound, that is because Harriet has not, as she realizes, yet been tried, though the events of the novel provide her with a terrible testing ground.

Her initial happiness is not, however, unmixed; for if Harriet is not an intellectual, she is intuitively intelligent; and her "anxious .... temperament"<sup>2</sup> tells her subconsciously that all is not well. Her dreams are disturbed, and the "apparition" of Luca in the garden is like a portent of disaster; he appears to the reader like a

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 25

2 *ibid*, p. 16

premonition of the destruction of her peace. As the plot unfolds, the novel invites one to speculate whether Harriet has the resources to withstand what events are preparing for her; and the initial assumption is that she is probably ill-equipped. Her Christianity is "vague", "even her charities were easy and pleasant and rich in the rewards of gratitude"<sup>1</sup>; and her personality seems too limp and somehow unbraced to cope with the knowledge of her husband's betrayal of love and trust.

But Harriet does not remind one of characters like Ann in An Unofficial Rose and Dora in The Bell for nothing; the resemblance between the former's "shapelessness"<sup>2</sup> and Harriet's "floppiness", and the appreciation of art which she shares with the latter are, of course, significant. The fact that she is like "a large limp suspended sea animal"<sup>3</sup> suggests her openness to experience; and implies that, unlike her husband, her consciousness is not perpetually proliferating self-dramas. She is not perverted by the "disease" of consciousness. As with Dora, too, (indeed she appears to me much as an older and more sober version of that early joyous portrait) great art provides her with an escape into a richer, freer world, which is "like being let out into a huge space"<sup>4</sup> where the hindering

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1    *ibid*, p. 16

2    see p. 307

3    Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 16

4    *ibid*, p. 53

self disappears.

It is these Murdochian virtues, then, which help to sustain Harriet in the shock of Blaise's letter. Equally sustaining is her apprehension of his continuing love for her, and the knowledge that she has not lost him.<sup>1</sup> Her image of herself as a "soldier's daughter, soldier's sister", absurd as it may be, also holds her steady; for her creator acutely realizes that we act well often from a sense of our own virtues. Harriet's instinct is to search for something to "help" both Blaise and herself in their hour of need; and it is hardly surprising that the spar she clasps is his pretence that Emily is no longer loved. In her subsequent conversation with him, eagerly anticipated by her in her desire to salve his suffering, she urgently seeks to establish this fact.

"'You aren't in love with her any more are you?

I know you said in the letter -'"<sup>2</sup>

and again,

"'You must be absolutely truthful now ....

absolutely literally carefully truthful.'"<sup>3</sup>

It is part of Harriet's tragedy to believe Blaise and to need

1    ibid, p. 145

2    ibid, p. 148

3    ibid, p. 148



to succour him; Iris Murdoch comments that "the warmth of Blaise's pleading began at last to stream through for her comfort."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, her forgiveness, her assumption that he must continue to support Emily and Luca properly, and her desire to meet Emily, look like moral strength; and these achievements are made in the teeth of real agony. Iris Murdoch conveys a powerful sense of the jealousy, outrage and horror which Harriet overcomes by a supreme effort, so that at the close of her talk with Blaise, he sees his wife "glowing with an energy and a certainty, almost an exhilaration, of moral force."<sup>2</sup> When he originally met her, he had sensed a kind of saintliness; now he feels he is experiencing angelic power.

But Harriet's visit to Emily, her desire to bring everything out into the "open", the subsequent invitations to Hood House, are not truly tokens of goodness; they are, as David intelligently realizes, attempts to keep the situation under her control. "In so far as his father still cherished this other woman, he must do so authorized, motivated, powered by his wife".<sup>3</sup> Harriet confronts Emily as "the legitimate spouse", and arouses shame and guilt in the latter.<sup>4</sup> She also derives "power" (significant meta-

1 *ibid*, p. 145

2 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 150

3 *ibid*, p. 196

4 *ibid*, p. 156

phor) from her actions to such a degree that Monty looks upon her as a new woman, capable even of sweeping away "all the old barriers of her nervousness, his coldness"<sup>1</sup>. Even the strident Emily is bemused by her;<sup>2</sup> and for a time, Harriet's resolution appears to hold the situation steady.

The effort of will which all this behaviour demands is clearly immense; and Edgar's absurd intervention and the débâcle of the party mercifully grant a temporary release for Harriet. She weeps, knowing that "the sheer awfulness of the situation had an impetus of its own which was beyond her will and beyond the will of others too."<sup>3</sup> Her collapse bears on Iris Murdoch's perception that it is "a delicate moral problem to decide how far the will can coerce the formed personality ..... without merely occasioning disaster."<sup>4</sup>

But if Harriet lives "like an embryo inside an egg, upon a supporting surrounding matrix of confidence in her own virtue",<sup>5</sup> she is no one's dupe; so that when Blaise again lies to her, leaves her for Emily and palliates this, as I have commented, with a second letter, she symbolically

1    *ibid*, p. 169

2    see pp. 179 - 180

3    *ibid*, pp. 213 - 214

4    Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 39

5    Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 264

switches off the Hood House water heaters and moves in with Monty. Now she sees her husband as wicked; he has become "that man"; and she will no longer dance attendance on him.<sup>1</sup> This momentary clear-sightedness later deserts her; and Harriet, in the closing stages of the novel, is a confused creature, caught up in patterns of behaviour as mechanical as her husband's. She turns in her need to Monty, only to meet cruel, if honest, rejection.<sup>2</sup> Edgar, too, turns aside her desperate appeal in favour of an illusion, as I have stated. Her flight to Germany and her brother is a last desperate reflex.

Before her death, she realizes that she will return to Blaise and Hood House, since he is the only one who needs her. Luca and David cannot "save" her; to forgive him and thus "perfect his happiness with Emily" is her "last resource".<sup>3</sup> Bleakly, she knows that he will abuse her, as he once abused Emily. Indeed, they will have changed rôles; and her "kindness" she thinks of as "weakness really". There is no elation in this mental decision; it does not offer the illusory release and sense of freedom which her previous rejection of Blaise generated. She is not free of herself but "caught in her own mind and condemned by her own being".<sup>4</sup>

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1    *ibid*, p. 248

2    *ibid*, p. 271

3    *ibid*, p. 334

4    *ibid*, p. 334



Her automatic protection of Luca and subsequent death throw her reflections, and indeed her whole personality and actions, into a different perspective. Harriet may have been confused and sometimes misguided in her thoughts and actions. If she had had a less illusory view of Blaise, such as Emily possesses, she might have behaved with a more far-reaching wisdom. She may, at times, have unconsciously sought power, not goodness. Like others, her psychological needs and make up have a significant part to play in her moral nature. Yet her final act looks very much like heroism, and plainly proceeds from her deepest being, in which the movement to goodness, however muddled, is innate. Her death resolves the conflict of the novel, and provides Blaise and Emily with the opportunity of grace, as I have observed. Her portrait is also, I think, a triumphant justification for the power of Iris Murdoch's view of the moral, since it generates a very real sense of what it is like to be human and aspire to the good.

I commented earlier that Titian's painting "Sacred and Profane Love" has been seen as a fusion of erotic and religious love. To a degree, Iris Murdoch attempts within this novel to see how far such a fusion is possible within human relationships; and her conclusions appear to be that any reconciliation of the two elements is likely to be dangerous and doubtful.

Finally, the character of Monty requires some exam-

ination, since it relates to Iris Murdoch's view of the transcendent, and to her notion that "suffering itself can play a demonic rôle."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his function in the novel is a multiple one; for in addition to the aspects just instanced, he represents a "power-figure" and stands, too, as something of a persona for the artist, as did Jake Donaghue in Under the Net. Perhaps these numerous facts impose too many demands on the character; for it never seems quite realized to me, though aspects of it are powerful.

As an undergraduate, Iris Murdoch comments that "Monty had rather crudely mimed the 'demonism' which it pleased him to feel within him",<sup>2</sup> thus creating for himself a persona which bears lucrative fruit in the figure of Milo Fane, and earning the exaggerated and absurd veneration of people like Edgar Demarnay. Later, he becomes locked within the sterility of this self-image; and his marriage to the terrible and wonderful Sophie increases his divorce from ordinary life and other individuals. His memories of Sophie (who has died before the novel begins) disclose that while there was "joy" in their marriage, their love was also a deep persecution to them both, since it did not lead to fulness of spirit, but rather jealousy, pain and confinement. Her painful suffering before her death caught them both up in horror and misery. Each was a torment to the other.

1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 68

2 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 37

Afterwards, Monty is consumed both by the fact of his bereavement and his inescapable remorse. He is diseased with pain.

"He had thought to live in suffering like a salamander in the flames. He had not expected or conceived of the sheer horror of her absence, he had not expected mourning to be a sort of fruitless searching, he had not foreseen the remorse. Why had he, quite apart from anything else, not made Sophie happier?"<sup>1</sup>

In his predicament, he exemplifies Blaise's miserable intuition that "the fruits of virtue and evil are automatic."<sup>2</sup>

Monty is not, however, much as he might wish to be, totally out off from existence by the impact of his loss; for many in the novel seek him out for advice, help, or simple contact, since he possesses authority of an austere kind. He is thus a descendent of early power figures like Mischa Fox of The Flight from the Enchanter; and in his clerical black and white and "failed spiritual vocation"<sup>3</sup> resembles Carel of The Time of the Angels, for both detect the hollowness at the universe's core. In all these

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1    *ibid*, p. 39

2    *ibid*, p. 84

3    *ibid*, p. 123



portraits, and in that of Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, there is the implication that a potentially good force has been perverted. The pedestal on which other characters place these figures exacerbates their natural detachment from the human; and in the case of Carel and Monty, their spiritual insight and ambition emerges in the eyes of other characters as something very like a demonic force. Monty himself realizes that his power is by no means uniformly beneficent. His stance as a bystander and chorus on Blaise's and Harriet's predicament often affords him an obscene exhilaration, which he does not always refuse; for his author's tough moral view allows her to report without extenuation <sup>the</sup> unpleasant human tendency to obtain vicarious pleasure from the troubles of others. Some of his acts, too, like the letter to Edgar, or the "murder" of Magnus Bowles are deliberately wanton and vindictive. Knowing Harriet's extremity, he yet stands by to watch her reaction to this news with a kind of delighted and alert detachment.

"'I'm so sorry', said Monty. He looked at her with pity, but also with a curious exhilaration. He tried to compose thoughts, words, in his head ... She [Harriet] sat like a stunned condemned prisoner before him."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>   ibid, p. 307

Yet he refuses, despite David's importunities, to have a "proper" talk with him which, to the latter, signifies a refusal to help him. Edgar corrects this misapprehension when he tells David that Monty "mistrusts that sort of power."<sup>1</sup> Monty believes, in fact, that the tentacles of the self reach out all too often to fasten on others; and while his behaviour to Edgar and Harriet appears cruel, it should rather be seen as an exercise of self-restraint, a refusal to create a contact which could only maim and distort both parties. Monty, like the majority of Iris Murdoch's characters is, in fact, an inextricable mixture of good and bad, a bundle of often contradictory impulses, which he can "control" more readily than many individuals because he is truthful, perceptive and detached. These attributes (one might almost term them qualities) are the source of his power, not some esoteric knowledge of the "true" nature of existence, or contact with demons. Perhaps Edgar's final assessment of him is nearest to the truth when he ruefully speculates that Monty may be "simply a chap with his own troubles, a chap just like me after all . . . . . He is not the dear awful monster I have sometimes thought him to be. He is an ordinary human fellow with his muddles and his needs."<sup>2</sup>

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1    *ibid*, p. 348

2    Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 366

Monty has himself realized, as his letter to Edgar acknowledges, that Edgar stands in some sort of special relationship to him.<sup>1</sup> Edgar's affection has made him "feel almost human", despite Monty's fastidious distaste for the other's "moral greed", and his horror at his "moral style". Edgar was the "felicitous instrument" which helped to release Monty from the limbo of suffering; and Monty realizes that his confession to him was not accidental: Edgar was possibly the only individual who could hear and intelligently absolve him. Once he has confessed to Sophie's murder, he experiences the symbolic relief of tears<sup>2</sup>; and becomes able to accept Edgar's advice to let the situation and Sophie go away from him. At last he is able to make decisions about his future and to act on them; and though these entail Italy, rather than Mockingham and the "bond" with Edgar, Monty is indubitably a freer character at the close of the novel, even if still locked within what he sees as "dull areas of egoism and failure which have no resonance and reflect no light."<sup>3</sup>

His conscious "passing on" of some of his pain to Kiki St. Loy<sup>4</sup>, because he sees her as a remarkable, if fortuitous, lever for change within his life has some symbolic, if little naturalistic, force within the novel.

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1    *ibid*, pp. 357 - 359

2    *ibid*, p. 298

3    *ibid*, p. 357

4    *ibid*, p. 323



More telling is the news that Doctor Ainsley, who had signed Sophie's death certificate, has committed suicide. Blaise, involved in his own troubles, has ignored the latter's constant appeals for help; and Ainsley's guilt at a crime not his own destroys him. The novel exposes the psychiatrist's shallow professional care; but, more interestingly, reveals that one cannot always "consciously" pass on pain, as Monty appears to think. Life's jumble obviates neat and direct cause and effect; as with Dora and Michael in The Bell, those who pay the price of sin may not be sin's perpetrators.

Monty's "failed spiritual vocation"<sup>1</sup> does, however, set him apart from the other characters to a certain degree. He accepts the fact of its failure with resignation, which relates him "more quietly to time" and allows him to live "without ambition from moment to moment."<sup>2</sup> Yet he still attempts to meditate and thus escape the sensible world and his own self, though his author starkly reveals his suspicion of his aims and motives in this process. He knows that it is possible "by sheer diligence ..... to set up a huge machine on to which one could gear oneself in a second."<sup>3</sup> Over the years, he perfects this technique; but for him "the enlightening spirit was absent."<sup>4</sup> it remains an experience only. The cage of his mean spirit still encompasses him;

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1    *ibid*, p. 123

2    *ibid*, p. 123

3    *ibid*, p. 123

4    *ibid*, p. 123

his obsessions "simply travelled with him like dominant viruses."<sup>1</sup>

He is sceptical about his desire to get rid of his ego, and does not know if he seeks knowledge, salvation, goodness, or simply power. He speculates whether, even if it seems that the world is a senseless jumble, it might not be better "to resort to the holiness of suffering and to consent to give some name ('love' for instance) to the ground of one's being, rather than to attempt this radical undoing of a natural essence".<sup>2</sup> In this predicament, he resembles his creator, I think, for her advocacy of the moral view she adopts arises from her desire to provide "new and fruitful places for reflection".<sup>3</sup> Like Monty, she searches for a way of looking which will yield the fullest fruit.

But despite his reservations, Monty continues to gear himself to "the machine", which, alone in the horror of Sophie's death, remains unchanged, "as if it had in spite of everything wedged its unconscious spearhead into a region beyond."<sup>4</sup> Nothing is claimed authorially for his efforts; indeed their presentation is largely speculative; but they do suggest that here may be another way of entry into the

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1    ibid, p. 124

2    ibid, p. 125

3    Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 45

4    Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 125

transcendent, of which the sublimation of human love was but one example. It is a speculation to which Iris Murdoch constantly returns; and I shall look a little more fully at it in the section, "Fiction and Concepts", which follows.



### Fiction and Concepts

I have suggested that Iris Murdoch is interested to explore in her fiction the difficulty of behaving morally in a human context, particularly within the sphere of sexual relationships. Her conclusions on the subject are conditional; she accepts all sides of man's nature - the rational, physical and emotional - and suggests that all these must come into play for an achieved relationship. If one aspect is exalted at the expense of another, danger, death and sterility can result: typically, the conclusion of The Sandcastle removes the feeling current of Mor's life, leaving him, cryptically, in the cage of duty. Equally important is the part which truth plays in these relationships; for deception (whether of the self or the other) not only entails confusion and distress, but also mars the depth and fruitfulness of any bond. These, however, are generalizations drawn from the bulk of her fiction, where, as in life, ideal relationships are very few. At best, her characters often only achieve the loving acceptance of the limitations of the self and the other which ultimately characterizes the relationship of Simon and Axel in A Fairly Honourable Defeat. They stumble towards a better relationship, as Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine stumbled towards goodness; and their progress is erratic and backsliding.

I have also commented that she is, as a philosopher, concerned within her fiction to test the validity of concepts and to speculate on some of the "realities" which may transcend man.<sup>1</sup> Since her field is moral philosophy, her interest in the claims of religion or ethics to support conduct is also evident. Many of these concerns and speculations have already emerged; the character of Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, for example, was seen as an examination of how far a "good" but untried person can progress morally, while Jake in Under the Net embodied Miss Murdoch's ideas on the delusive snare of the self, and The Bell scrutinized the nature of "the good life". In this section, I should like to draw together some of these ideas and to look particularly at concepts such as freedom, goodness and love in a little more detail.

The canvassing of concepts within Iris Murdoch's fiction is not, in my view, a limitation of her creativity; but rather a scaffolding or underpinning for the fictions, and a catalyst which appears to release her concrete and particular insights. Observation also reveals that these concepts are persistently, and often inextricably linked with her moral vision; so that a concept like artistic form, for example, is viewed in its moral connotations, as well as its artistic and aesthetic ones. The novels thus become very rich and many-faceted objects. This stiffening of concepts, particularly concepts of value, also provides an inestimable dimension for Iris Murdoch's fiction; it provides her with a language and perspective through which

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<sup>1</sup> see pp238 -239



she can survey her characters and their actions.

Antonia Byatt directed attention to the "degrees of freedom" available to various individuals in the Murdochian universe; and there would be a good case for arguing that freedom was one of the initial concepts which Iris Murdoch investigated in her fiction.<sup>1</sup> In Under the Net, Jake Donaghue was pictured as free in the sense that he refused to be restricted by social or emotional ties; that is, he took from others without return, or responsibility. He refused to work regularly, to pay rent, or to play his part in society. Thus he was free, yet simultaneously, as the analysis of his predicament displayed, he was very much the victim of his own limitations and selfishness, losing Anna and Madge because of his nature. He was the dupe of others; and highly subject to his own erroneous view of life.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the novel, he has rejected his former "freedom", realizing that it was itself a powerful form of servitude. In its place, he assumes his neglected vocation, and will discipline himself and his talent in his efforts to improve his writing.

Miss Murdoch's presentation of Jake and his bohemian rejection of ordinary society and its taboos revealed her

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1 see Antonia Byatt, Degrees of Freedom

2 see pp. 263 - 264



awareness of the limitations of such a shallow viewpoint; her knowledge that such "freedom" is dearly bought at the expense of discipline and self-knowledge. Jake's freedom was delusive and valueless; and the close of Under the Net, with his re-entry to society by means of his hospital job and his writing, reiterates an implicit notion of his author's that to help others is a good as well as a liberation of self. It underlines her feeling, muted and understated maybe by comparison with Doris Lessing's insistence, that we are members one of another.

This concept of vocation, the losing of the enclosing personality in the impersonality of work is also one which has interested Iris Murdoch continuously. There is a full study of the problem through the characterization of Catherine Fawley and Michael in The Bell; but it plays a decisive part in An Unofficial Rose, too, where Randall pretends to write plays - an aspect of his desire for shape in life - only to surrender them when he realizes that they are merely a form of self-expression, whereas his rose-growing was his life's work. Max Lejour in The Unicorn is also portrayed as committed to the life of the scholar. Barney in The Red and the Green is a fascinating and sometimes comic study on the theme of vocation, who resembles a Michael Meade who has drifted further down the road to perdition. He had believed, like Michael, that his vocation was to be a priest; but scandalous conduct has ruined his hopes. He contracts an odd marriage which he is unable to

consummate; and under the concealment of ostensible research into the lives of the Irish saints begins to write his Memoir. In this, all the blame for his past weakness and present misery is fastened with cunning felicity on to his wife; it expresses his view that her lack of understanding, her inability to bring refinement and order into his home have driven him into the arms of Millie. What originally might have been an honest call to religion is now a fantasy substitute, which preoccupies him to the exclusion of all other duties. Miles, in Bruno's Dream, is a similar study in the mechanics of a vocation; for though he appears to be a true poet, his verbal skill is achieved at the expense of his responsibility to his father and his wife.

The treatment of this theme is consistent with Miss Murdoch's other views: a vocation, as with the nuns at Imber, must be toughly embraced and accepted for itself, not as a cocoon for the fat self, nor as an escape from responsibility for others. Carel's vocation, he asserts to his brother Marcus in The Time of the Angels, is to be a priest even if he has, in the latter's weak phrase, "lost his faith". But the novel demonstrates that his calling is associated intimately, as in the case of Michael Meade, with sexual imbalance; for Carel has originally seduced his brother's wife out of spite and later commits incest

with Elizabeth, the product of the union. The lowering light which appears to hang over the novel and the characterization of Carel emphasizes the pervertedly enclosing nature of his "vocation"; self is not released by work or calling, or rather only a demented and distorting aspect of self.

The freedom which Jake attains at the close of Under the Net is largely a personal one; and if he escapes partially from the restrictions of his own personality, that escape is paradoxically dependent upon his acceptance of other restrictions, such as the discipline of work. Mor's freedom in The Sandcastle is comparable; for he has had to realize that he is not "free" to elope with Rain. He has had to resume the ties which bind him to his wife and children. These are the price he pays for a degree of truth and insight. Continually in the Murdoch universe the resolution of a novel brings one back to Max Lejour's comment,

"That rag freedom! Freedom may be a value in politics, but it's not a value in morals. Truth, yes. But not freedom. That's a flimsy idea, like happiness. In morals, we are all prisoners, but the name of our cure is not freedom."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Unicorn, 1963, p. 114



Max himself may be the prisoner of old age and ill health; but he is mentally free and as competent as other characters in The Unicorn to estimate the value of Hannah's act in that novel. The character of Hannah is, of course, a very deliberate artefact constructed around the idea of freedom; for not only is she physically a prisoner, but she has also imposed her own fate on herself, has made herself the victim of her own system of taboos and rituals.<sup>1</sup> Her deliberate and fetish-like acceptance of limitations can perhaps be compared with the "little austerities" of the lay community at Imber. In neither case is the discipline fruitful; for it does not help to control the anarchic psyche but forces it underground, and makes of the pattern of restraint a magical charm which provides the self with "energy". Her character is also fascinating evidence of Iris Murdoch's view that an over-preoccupation with the moral can be dangerous and lead to a divorce from life.<sup>2</sup>

Ann in An Unofficial Rose is bound in a different fashion and more usefully by her concept of her wifely duties to Randall, despite his desertion. In a later book, Bruno's Dream, Miss Murdoch also pictures Diana at the close of the novel as imprisoned by her sense of duty to Bruno; a captive of the sickroom, she remains with the dying old man, because of her love for him. The strange figure of Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat succours his abusive and

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1 vide Antonia Byatt, op. cit., Chapter Eight

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 43

unattractive father, Leonard, in his sickness, too. He accepts the old man totally, pitying his miserable life and sufferings, just as he accepts, with deep anguish, Morgan, his erring wife. Characters in the novel, like Hilda, and Morgan herself, are scornful of his humble assumption of his duty, criticizing him for his "flat" concern and his obvious ineptitude. Morgan claims he needs "a shot of ordinary natural toughness."<sup>1</sup> But his shapeless and incomplete life resembles that of Ann in An Unofficial Rose and Harriet's in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine; and, a manifestly humble man, the novel raises the question whether "although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good."<sup>2</sup> His acceptance of the constriction of duty is an aspect of love.

In her accentuation of the assumption by individuals of their responsibilities, of their acceptance - not always willing or prompt - of restrictions because they are seen as morally theirs, Iris Murdoch is a most traditional writer. While she does not uncritically endorse the ideas of duty, responsibility and related concepts, she is deeply sympathetic to them, seeing very sharply that if the individual accepts a situation or a person as "his", then only

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1 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, 1970, p. 49

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 104

by assuming that burden will he reach anything like self-content. She also urges in her philosophical essays that "virtue is good habit and dutiful action."<sup>1</sup> Her novels display an awareness of the human need to be responsible for others; yet they also expose her intuition that this is a two-edged instrument; for a sense of responsibility can be arrogant and destructive - as in Carel's perversion of Elizabeth in The Time of the Angels - or balanced and helpful, as in Michael Meade's final entwining of his fate with Catherine Fawley's in The Bell. She believes, like Muriel Spark and Doris Lessing, that the individual is ultimately self-responsible, though, of course, she does not accept Miss Spark's religious justification of this idea. Her stress, too, on the escape of the individual from the cage of his own personality, or from his selfish and false view of life is a familiar one in English fiction. One thinks of Dorothea and Lydgate in Middlemarch in connection with the theme of duty; and of Emma and Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's work, Pip, Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey in Dickens' in connection with the theme of self-awareness.

In The Flight from the Enchanter, she turned to survey social freedom, to investigate how people can be enslaved by a mechanistic and bureaucratic state. Nina in that novel was the victim of an impersonal society, dying

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 91



because she imagined her statelessness was, in England as in parts of Europe, a capital offence. Those close to her, like Rosa, in their self-preoccupation neglect to allay her fears; and society itself is too remote and abstract to offer comfort. It is a pity that her author has never returned to this theme in any depth; for it would broaden her work, and lessen the tendency to obsession which her concern with personal relationships can display.

A concept which often, in the early novels, necessarily and logically accompanied the idea of freedom, was that of power. In The Flight from the Enchanter, Mischa Fox was the great enslaver; a man whose own hands may be clean, but who employs creatures like Calvin Blick to pursue his ends for him. Mischa is a cursory study in the effects on the individual of the manipulation of power, which is again a fruitful area for his author, and one to which she has constantly returned, as previous sections will have indicated. Primarily, perhaps, she has been concerned with the effects of power, whether on those who are its unwilling victims, or on those who spontaneously conceive a slavish admiration for the power figure. These portraits sharply expose the almost invariably vicious nature of the relationship which ensues

between enslaver and enslaved; for they disclose that, for the latter, his capacity to deal with life is inevitably curtailed. In A Severed Head, however, Martin Lynch-Gibbon's relationship with Honor Klein bodes well, for she becomes the means of disentangling him from illusion. But Iris Murdoch has also manifested a deep interest in the predicament of the power figure himself, whether he has been placed on his pedestal against his will (as is the case with Hugo in Under the Net), or whether he is simultaneously repelled and attracted by his innate authority, as is Monty in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine. These figures (who range from Edmund in The Italian Girl, Pat Dumay in The Red and the Green, Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat and Carel in The Time of the Angels) possess force of a magnetic kind, which draws other characters towards them, particularly, of course, those characters who require some sort of bond or tutelage. They invest the figure with mythical attributes, which are frequently seen as demonic.

Morgan's account of her relationship with Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat is a good example of this. She tells her sister that they lived like gods on a heroic plane as if they were creatures of myth, a relationship totally removed from the muddled tenderness and

exposed feelings of her marriage to Tallis.<sup>1</sup> Julius is indeed represented as a character of real authority and distinction, which are the partial consequences, as in Monty's case, of his rationality and detachment from ordinary human feelings. Yet he rejects both Morgan and her version of their relationship, which to him has been a compact deliberately entered into for recognizable ends, such as sexual pleasure and a supposed compatibility of temperament. To Morgan's cries of love and suffering, he responds coldly. Indeed, it was her intuitive apprehension of this deep "coldness" which drove her from him.<sup>2</sup> He exposes her suffering as an undignified self-drama, which events in the novel, and her constant obsession with her appearance, corroborate. He claims it is pointless and unnecessary "like all the rest of the suffering human beings do every day."<sup>3</sup> He can no longer summon up interest in her; and refuses to act a part in the "ritual of purification or even punishment"<sup>4</sup> which she desires. Furthermore, he insists he was truthful about the fact that his feelings for her were "probably temporary" and superficial; he wants nothing more than to escape from the clinging muddle of her emotions.

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1 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, pp. 46 - 48

2 *ibid*, p. 132

3 *ibid*, p. 125

4 *ibid*, p. 127



Julius is a fascinating study, and further evidence of Iris Murdoch's notion that suffering can itself be demonic.<sup>1</sup> Tallis alone learns that he had spent the war in Belsen, a fact which Julius does not broadcast or comment upon, but which has clearly contributed to his view of life. He possesses "no general respect for the human race" since they are "a loathsome crew and don't deserve to survive."<sup>2</sup> Austerely, he notes their vicarious enjoyment of the pain of others; and sees art, philosophy and theology as flights from the pain of consciousness.<sup>3</sup> To Rupert, he insists that abstractions like the Good are dreams, and that goodness itself is dull. He asserts that "the path of virtue is so unutterably depressing that it can be guaranteed to break the spirit and quench the vision of anybody who consistently attempts to tread it."<sup>4</sup> This is, as the reader realizes, no bad gloss on the life and efforts of Tallis Browne, and an unconscious reiteration of Hilda and Morgan's reflections on the subject.<sup>5</sup>

Evil, however, is "exciting and fascinating and alive"<sup>6</sup>; and the desire for power is "important".<sup>7</sup>

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1 see p. 331

2 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 194

3 *ibid*, p. 197

4 *ibid*, p. 199

5 see p. 346

6 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 199

7 *ibid*, p. 200

His lust for dominion combines with his fastidious need to be free of Morgan; and culminates in his mischief-making bet to her that he can divide anyone from anyone.<sup>1</sup> This wager, to which she rapidly and obscenely agrees, ostensibly entails the detachment of Simon from Axel; but Julius perceives that the scheme contains still more promise. Economically, he also determines to prise Morgan from him by means of the pretence of an affair between her and Rupert (the novel has already deftly conveyed a suggestion of their mutual attraction); and his mischief will even test the latter's "high-minded" illusions.

The results of his exhilarating game are revealing. He initially entraps Simon in a web of subterfuge and misery, which sours and threatens his relationship with Axel. Simon's own precarious self-love and guilt invite the foothold. Later, however, Julius' torments intensify, so that Simon is provoked into pushing him into Hilda and Rupert's pool, though this desperate action also precipitates Simon's confession to his lover, and eventual salvation. Axel and Simon's relationship, after this trial, achieves a new depth and dimension; they both see the other more plainly and sympathetically as human and vulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 208

Paradoxically, by accepting failure and expecting less, they achieve more. Julius' evil has proved curiously ineffective, in the long term, against Simon's frail simplicity, and against his innermost spirit which turns in desperate defence against Julius' malice. The real key to Simon's escape, however, perhaps lies with his mediocre view of himself; for if this helps to entrap him, it also allows him to tell the truth to Axel without vanity or self-drama. By contrast, as Julius observes, Hilda, Morgan and Rupert are the victims of their own vanity.

Julius' meddling with the happy and apparently achieved relationship of Hilda and Rupert is traumatic. He awakens, as he acutely realizes, Hilda's self-image, and simultaneously destroys Rupert's notion of his own goodness. The ensuing tragedy supports James' notion in The Bell that "the chief requirement of the good life ... is to live without any image of oneself."<sup>1</sup> Like Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, Rupert needs to think of himself as virtuous; and once this concept is gone, he has no defence against life. Hilda's frantic attempts to reach him and reassure him of her love, once she learns the truth from Julius, are abortive, with the result that he dies by misadventure. Julius King sees and accepts no guilt for his death. Instead, he asks Tallis, "You concede that I am an instrument of justice?"<sup>2</sup> The latter does not reply; but later thinks of the situa-

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Bell, p. 132

2 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 367



tion as

"deeply the product of its circumstances. Tallis did not try to unravel these nor did he speculate about the guilt of any person, not even about his own. He grieved blankly over something which seemed, in its disastrous compound of human failure, muddle and sheer chance, so like what it was all like."<sup>1</sup>

Julius closes the novel with his visit to Paris, where he searches for the restaurant which Rupert had recommended to him. He is "better now that he was not closely involved with human beings. Involvement was always bad for his nerves"; and an interesting menu and the sun on his back lead him to the reflection that "life was good".<sup>2</sup>

His actions and viewpoint relate him closely to Monty in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, as I have observed<sup>3</sup>; and both stand in an interesting relation to their creator. Potentially tragic figures in their frigidity, they comment challengingly upon her deeply-cherished views of goodness;

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1    ibid, pp. 398 - 399

2    ibid, pp. 401 - 402

3    see p. 333

and can perhaps most fruitfully be seen as symbols of the artist's alter ego. Julius, though he is a biologist, does in fact claim to have the instincts of an artist.<sup>1</sup> Both desire shape and form freed from emotional taint; they express Iris Murdoch's own (she feels, fatal and misleading) longing for the "consolation" of form.<sup>2</sup> Their involvement with the human is symbolically destructive; for they remove or destroy individuals in their attempts to order and discipline the contingent.

Compelling figures as they are, and while one often appreciates their destruction of the self-gratifying illusions of characters like Morgan, other characters and forces in the fictions can still stand against them. While their view of man and existence, in that he is largely an enigmatic, muddled and restricted victim of circumstances (a recognizable aspect of their creator's ideas) is cogent, the assumptions which they insist automatically follow from this are not entirely convincing. Some of Rupert's views on goodness, for example, (while he may be a far from satisfactory embodiment of them) have validity; and Simon's feeling that it "is an instinct, and not a disreputable one, to be consoled by love"<sup>3</sup> is borne out by the totality of the fiction,

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1 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 366

2 see p. 258

3 Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 393

where Tallis' messy but honest life bears obscure witness to love. What they do expose very sharply, however, is the savagery and misery of existence, and the precarious nature of any efforts to transform it.

Central to all her fiction is, of course, the concept of goodness; for I believe she shares Edgar Demarnay's view that it is the duty of every man to make himself better;<sup>1</sup> and her philosophy itself reveals her belief that man is instinctively attracted to the excellent.<sup>2</sup> Her idea of goodness is inescapably entwined with her view of art; for she sees, as I have suggested, art and morals as twin aspects of a single struggle.<sup>3</sup> The key to the problem of goodness, as it is to the endeavours of art, is love, which is a token of our spiritual natures, and an ultimate release into the transcendent.

My examination of characters like Jake Donaghue in Under the Net, or Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, or even the immediately preceding comments on power figures within the fiction will, I hope, have sufficiently canvassed these concepts. Figures like Harriet, Ann from An Unofficial Rose and Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat reveal their creator's perception that goodness may appear

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, p. 296

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", p. 103

3 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 41



dull and shapeless. It may lack the excitement and shapeliness which dynamic creatures like Julius King, for example, demand of life; for it forms part of the continuously expanding web of the individual's perception of life and other people. Ann, to her husband Randall, is messy and flabby and open "like a bloody dog rose"; she never performs the splendid and large "good" act which would satisfy his demand for form. Instead she personifies her author's view that the moral life goes on endlessly, and is not "switched on" at isolated moments of choice. Hence it lacks that drama and shape which Iris Murdoch sees as one of mankind's major obsessions. It is, as Julius King observes, dull.

Randall rejects Ann's unreflective and conventional goodness as stifling and shapeless; he enters instead into a relationship with Lindsay and Emma Sands which satisfies his need for form. Later, however, he becomes suspicious that he has not acted "freely", that his seduction of Lindsay has been engineered by Emma. The novel, in exposing his predicament, also shows how his situation forms a nexus for so many of the concepts which preoccupy his author; here, particularly, the concepts of goodness, freedom, the desire for form, and the nature of love. Work after work employs a comparable technique; for, as I have observed, Iris Murdoch's fiction and philosophy are inseparably interconnected, while the latter is characterized, as she admits, by its "circularity".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 44

Randall, in face of the pain of consciousness, seeks the "consolation" of form.<sup>1</sup> Like Jake Donaghue in Under the Net, however, that desire proves a snare and a delusion; and An Unofficial Rose finally hints that he may, ultimately, have to return to his "shapeless" wife. Ann is herself a study in Iris Murdoch's apprehension that "an unexamined life can be virtuous;"<sup>2</sup> and by means of this character, she also looks at how far religion can support conduct. Ann is possibly one of Iris Murdoch's most extensive and effective examinations of ordinary human goodness; though she picks up features of her character in many other portraits, (in Mary Clothier in The Nice and the Good, Diana in Bruno's Dream, Norah Shadox-Brown in The Time of the Angels, for example); and she surveys the question of religiously inspired "goodness" in characters like Denis and Hannah in The Unicorn, or Catherine Fawley in The Bell. Ann is second-cousin to Everard of The Sandcastle in her superficial insipidity; she is good, yet unsuccessful in inspiring love in her husband and daughter. Her struggles with Randall force her to reflect on her own nature; and she concludes that her behaviour has been largely unconscious, the automatic responses of a woman who lives from day to day. The novel suggests that part of the reason for her negativity lies in her deliberate effacement of herself and needs

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1 see p.258

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 1



in favour of her family's. Ann, indeed, is moving along the lines of the "extinction of personality"; she has not chosen to be good; her goodness has, as it were emerged accidentally. This examination of goodness shows Iris Murdoch at her best; for the portrait of Ann impresses by its fidelity to human experience, and by the weight of moral insight which lies behind its explication. It also suggests that to be good is less a conscious act underpropped by reason and religious or ethical dictates than a matter of concrete behaviour inspired by attitudes of love towards individuals. Marcus, in The Time of the Angels speculates at the close of that novel that this may be the only effective way to be "good", or to speak of "goodness".

I have suggested The Bell is a very full and sympathetic examination of what constitutes the "good life"; and that it attempts to see how far religious belief can support conduct. The examination of Iris Murdoch's view of man and moral values disclosed her insight that prayer can be a source of good "energy"<sup>1</sup>; and throughout her fiction, her sensitive treatment of the potential of the religious view is marked. The deliberate juxtaposition of the enclosed order of nuns and the community at Imber, the subject matter of James' and Michael's sermons, the paralleling of the behaviour of the "witch" Dora and that of the religiously committed, like Mrs. Mark, sharply point up

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1 see p.249



the debate. Iris Murdoch here accepts belief as factual, since she is interested to observe its fruits; and though there is no explicit approbation of a particular code, she demonstrates her awareness of the human need for guidance, and for the acceptance of rules, or a system of values. The nuns at Imber, James (though she is critical of his inflexibility) and Peter Topglass are perhaps the only characters in the novel who approach goodness; the former because of their unselfish and unself-regarding obedience, their cheerful dismissal of self in the cause of Christ, as I have observed, the latter through simple adherence to rules and a healthy objectivity. But the characterization of Michael and Catherine exposes the ambiguity of faith since, as previous comments implied, the former makes of his belief "a spiritual drama", an externalization of his inner conflict and neurosis, while the latter would enter the convent to shelter her imbalance. Their portraits expose the gap between faith and wish-fulfilment, the distinction between selfless adherence to belief and self-excuse; while the activities of Dora, the outsider, disclose that a code may be powerless to aid right conduct, unless the world and its inhabitants are seen and estimated clearly. The disciplined and feeling heart may point the way more helpfully than the rigid adherence to rules, as the violent death of Nick Fawley displays.

Iris Murdoch allows herself the infrequent luxury of authorial comment in considering the foundation of the lay community at Imber. She states:-

"Those who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed. Michael had not particularly cherished these hopes; yet he was sorry to find himself so immediately placed in the position of one who by force of personality holds a difficult team together."<sup>1</sup>

Like Muriel Spark, she highlights that salutary if unpalatable human truth that common adherence to an ideal does not ensure community or identity of interest. The satiric observation of The Mandelbaum Gate, and the objective reporting of political confusion and fissure in novels like Doris Lessing's Landlocked, reveal the novelist undeluded by religion's or ideology's abstract claims of harmony or brotherhood, and pointing instead to individual man who is largely unable to control or coerce his desires or to subsume them to larger ends.

Michael acknowledges early that his team is "difficult"; from the individual character sketches, it is clear that clashes are likely if not inevitable. They have

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Bell, p. 86

major disagreements over policy, distorting minor debates, such as the purchase of a mechanical cultivator, or the shooting of squirrels into critical issues. Their behaviour when the bishop arrives is an indication of the lack of group identity - people rush madly about, nothing is organized - the novelist makes her point with humour and accuracy. Even more significant is the radical split in belief which exists between Michael and James, and the way in which this is recognized by others, who assume, sheep-like, that they must fall in behind one or the other; the factions, even before Dora's mischief, are marshalling.

James and Michael clash temperamentally and idealistically; though there is never an open rift, since James is truly benign, or wishes to assume that no divergence of opinion exists. Initially, they conflict over the arrival of Nick. Michael could hardly be described as enthusiastic to have Nick at Imber; but James is positively antipathetic, and displays by his objections, how little he knows of people, sin, or the world. Their attitudes towards the management of the community are dissimilar; James assumes that all will rub along smoothly, as it might if everyone were like him. Michael knows (he is more of a realist) that confusion will result, and that some sort of authority must be exercised. It is unfortunate for the enterprise that it is Michael's particular dilemma to realize that he must exercise control over others, while he is simultaneously



and, the novel reveals, irresponsibly repelled by the concept of authority. Finally, as displayed in the texts of their two sermons, and as I have argued previously, they diverge fundamentally in belief.

James believes in selfless obedience to rules; actions for him are simply right or wrong as they are enjoined. Michael's attitude is, as I have tried to show, more flexible; yet his preoccupation with motivation, with making the right choice for the right reasons, is ultimately sterile, since it is inextricably entwined with his self-deception and the tendency to adopt self-glamourizing postures. The community's failure with Dora points up the conflict between rules and right feeling with precision. Initially, her chief contact is Mrs. Mark, a character who employs her religion to bolster up her own self-esteem: like the Italian priests in The Mandelbaum Gate, she has already staked her claim to a large portion of heaven, and will repel all intruders with righteous aggression. From the moment when she rebuffs Dora's friendly attempt to find out about her past to her sermonizing while they are decorating the new bell, it is a history of failure in sensibility and common sense. Her attitude to Dora is that of a rather special person talking down to a child. Yet this ridiculous parody of help has been instigated by James: "'Margaret is such a motherly soul and Dora seems to like her.'"<sup>1</sup>

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Bell, pp. 231 - 232

Her moralizing is patently destined to antagonize: and when it is set in the perspective of Dora's ostracism by the holy brethren, it becomes ludicrous.

"'I hope you won't mind my saying these things', said Mrs. Mark. 'After all, it isn't as if we were all just on holiday here. I know you aren't used to this sort of atmosphere. But one must remember that little escapades which would be quite harmless in another place do matter here because, well, we do try to live a certain rather special sort of life, with certain special standards, you know. We live by rules ourselves and if our guests just don't there'll be chaos, won't there? It stands to reason. I know this sounds awfully dull and sober - and I'm sure your London friends would think we were a very stuffy lot. But trying to live up to ideals does often make one look ridiculous. And what I mean is this, that an inexperienced person may be quite upset by a sort of companionate friendliness in a member of the other sex, if he isn't used to that sort of thing. So we must be very careful, musn't we? Oh dear, am I being terribly solemn?'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 244

In an almost identical, though graver way, Nick Fawley, whose sins are hardly those of irresponsibility and childishness, is admitted to Imber as the fallen sinner; yet he is not even allowed to live with the brethren, or treated to a sermon, calculated to uplift him. I have already mentioned James's opposition to his arrival; again he is neatly pigeon-holed as a lost cause. Even Michael, who has loved Nick, is afraid of corruption, dodges contact with the latter, and purports not to see what could be described as attempts on Nick's part to bridge the gulf which now exists between them. The community explicitly refuse to see Nick as their business, and only shun and ignore him. Charity and tolerance emerge as abstractions; higher ideals remain higher.

Nick's death, their responsibility, assumes a tragic status in the novel. He has lived and died in a puzzling isolation, with no one to offer him affection or help. Michael's is the specific wrong, yet the Pharisaic attitude of the others has been, as Iris Murdoch discloses, culpable.

His twin, Catherine, presents an interesting parallel to his experiences. Nick has suffered from the fact that he has been prematurely judged and condemned; Catherine has been prematurely judged and canonized. She is required to play a rôle too high for her, and because the brethren regard her as a saint, a view which "energizes" them, cannot retreat before it is too late, while I have suggested



her vocation is founded on sexual neurosis. Margaret Strafford has spoken to Dora of "our little saint"; and Catherine is no longer seen as an individual with needs and weaknesses, except by Dora, the outsider. Michael has originally suspected an imbalance in her;<sup>1</sup> but he has soon forgotten this in view of her keen efforts and obvious devotion. Only Dora, because she is guiltless of the common tendency to "place" people, sees Catherine freshly.

"I never go into the water," said Catherine.

'I can swim, but not at all well, and I don't like it. I think I must be afraid of water. I often dream about drowning.' She looked rather sombrely down at the lake: in the shadow of the causeway it was obscure and green, the water thick, full of weeds and floating matter.

'Do you? How funny. I never do,' said Dora. She turned to look at Catherine. It came to her how very melancholy she looked; and Dora, her imagination abruptly set in motion, wondered for a moment whether Catherine could possibly really want to be a nun.

'You can't really want to go in there!' said Dora suddenly .....

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1    *ibid*, p. 112

"Catherine looked up surprised, and then smiled very kindly, looking straight at Dora for the first time. 'There are things one doesn't choose,' she said. 'I don't mean they're forced on one. But one doesn't choose them. These are often the best things.'

"I was right, thought Dora triumphantly. She doesn't want to go in. It's a sort of conspiracy against her. They've all been saying for so long that she's going in, and calling her their little saint and so on, and now she can't get out of it. And stuff like what James was saying this morning."<sup>1</sup>

Initially, Dora's judgement of the situation appears absurd; it is only later in the novel that it is clear that it is perceptive and accurate. Catherine is perilously near to unbalance; she has also fallen in love with Michael. She considers her love a guilty, impure passion; and the destruction of the bell appears to her as a fitting revelation of her depravity. What looks like "obedience" to the situation, the erosion of self in the cause of truthfulness and higher aims which Miss Murdoch so admires<sup>2</sup>, is in fact

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1    *ibid*, p. 139

2    see, for example, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 39

an extreme and neurotic dependence on signs and symbols. The self is not ignored in a balanced acceptance of its fallen nature so much as pushed down and out of sight to conceal its depravity. Like those innumerable characters who rely on power figures such as Julius King to determine or resolve their lives for them, Catherine refuses to be self-responsible. Her attempt at suicide discloses the psychic and moral dangers of her position, while the lay community's guilt is clear. Michael sorrowfully reflects on his inattentive blindness, revealing his creator's view that moral problems are frequently a question of looking.

"In so far as Michael was thinking about anything during that day he was thinking about Catherine. The revelation made to him in the scene by the lake had surprised him so profoundly that he was still unable, in his mind, to pick the matter up at all. He was left, still gaping over it, horrified, shocked, full of amazement and pity ..... At the same time, he reproached himself, distressed that he had never guessed, or tried to guess, what really went on in Catherine's mind, and that when now some part of it had been made plain there was so little he could do. He tried to make his thought of her a constant prayer."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Bell, p. 292



Iris Murdoch shows that the community has failed because it has come out of the world to escape its responsibilities, not to see them in a fresher and saner light. By evading the duties on its own doorstep. its collapse becomes inevitable. Paradoxically, the removed community, far from providing a release from pressure or an "escape from human frailty" has proved to be a forcing ground for error.

The Abbess suggests to Michael its failure has been, ultimately, one of love. She states:-

"Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back."<sup>1</sup>

But if the lay brotherhood "expires of unreality", Iris Murdoch's findings on the enclosed order are sympathetic, as I have previously outlined.<sup>2</sup> The sight of renegade nuns might be expected to gladden her heart; for she enjoys human eccentricity and the bizarre; but her presentation is cogent and respectful. The nuns are represented as lively, unself-regarding and effective; Mother Clare saves Catherine's life, the Abbess helps to maintain Michael's equilibrium. While their author does

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1    ibid, p. 237

2    .    see pp. 285 -286

not share their belief in the rites which they celebrate, she respects them, for she knows that attention to God can be a source of good energy.<sup>1</sup> The little scene where Toby trespasses on the convent grounds is a good indication of her treatment.<sup>2</sup> Toby has irresponsibly indulged himself in seeing the nuns as "bacchantes"; but the nun who ejects him (for, despite her courtesy, that is what she does) is sensible and down to earth. Her approach to the situation, enclosed, remote creature that she is is manifestly more concrete, human and persuasive than Toby's immature fantasies.

Indeed, the deliberate contrast between the "little austerities" of the lay brotherhood (no flowers in their rooms, silent meals, religious readings) and the observances of the convent pointedly underlines the escapist and puerile nature of the former. They ape the nun's strictness but in the fashion of children parodying their elders; and these superficial disciplines, as the events of the novel show, do not aid their self-examination or curb their appetites and weaknesses; rather it feeds the self-importance of their egos. Their major disputes as a community are over the shooting of squirrels or the purchase of a mechanical cultivator, topics which reveal their grow-

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1 see, for example, "On 'God' and 'Good'", pp. 55 - 56

2 see The Bell, Chapter 13

ing lack of perspective. By contrast the nuns appear to maintain a fruitful sense of balance; they are lively and fresh in their approach to individuals, while their wholehearted and selfless adherence to rules, in the interest of faith, releases much of their potential.

Such a portrait is clearly most sympathetic; for Iris Murdoch sees many roads to the Good. There are indications, however, that their gains have not been achieved without loss; their sexual instincts have been suppressed or sublimated<sup>1</sup> - (which would not be possible for everyone); and they possibly sacrifice a degree of individuality in submitting to a conforming ethos. But the proper exercise of religious faith, obedience to rules which she frequently endorses, manifestly releases the individual from the cage of self and enables him to behave well to others.

The examination of goodness and faith in The Bell succeeds because it is rooted in well-established characterization and an open form which allows comparison and reflection free play. By contrast, The Time of the Angels is quite dissimilar; for it is a closed obsessive novel in which, as she has confessed, a religious or metaphysical idea is at its heart.<sup>2</sup> The pressure of its form generates

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1 When Mother Clare rescues Catherine she is oblivious of her half-naked state, which might imply a healthy unself-consciousness or a lack of awareness of the physical.

2 see W. K. Rose, op. cit.



interest in a further aspect of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy. In this novel she speculates on the consequences for morality of the demise of belief, not just in God, but in absolutes, the predicament of an entirely accidental contingent universe where, as Marcus and Norah Shadox-Brown perceive, man has still to go on. The vision of power figures like Julius King and Monty is thus at the very centre of the fiction; for Caryl visualizes creation as given over to Chaos and Old Night, and proclaims his awful knowledge of the true nature of life to his brother. He urges the latter to speculate,

"Suppose the truth were awful, suppose it was just a black pit, or like birds huddled in the dust in a dark cupboard? Suppose only evil were real, only it was not evil since it had lost even its name? Who could face this?"<sup>1</sup>

He adds,

"The disappearance of God does not simply leave a void into which human reason can move. The death of God has set the angels free. And they are terrible ..... There are principalities and powers. Angels are the thoughts of God. Now he has been dissolved into his thoughts which

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, The Time of the Angels, 1966, p. 184

are beyond our conception in their nature and their multiplicity and their power. God was at least the name of something which we thought was good. Now even the name has gone and the spiritual world is scattered. There is nothing any more to prevent the magnetism of many spirits .... We are creatures of accident, operated by forces we do not understand. What is the most important fact about you and me, Marcus? That we were conceived by accident. That we could walk into the street and be run over by a car. Our subjection to chance even more than our mortality makes us potentially spiritual. Yet it is this too which makes spirit inaccessible to us. We are clay, Marcus, and nothing is real for us except the uncanny womb of Being into which we shall return."<sup>1</sup>

In his vision of a random and terrible world where powers without responsibility, focus or end are at play, his creator speculates on an aspect and development of her own viewpoint. Carel's view, like that of other "demonic" figures is horribly compulsive; but it is countered, if feebly, by his brother Marcus, who asserts, initially, a

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1    *ibid*, pp. 185 - 186

belief in absolutes; Good exists, he claims, as does Truth. It is also opposed by Norah, whose limited, reductive and pragmatic view still enjoys some validity. She expresses Iris Murdoch's notion that conventional morality is, after all, in many ways necessary. All agonize over the position of morality now that the stamp of religion or ethics has been removed; and there is even a feeble contribution to the debate in the pseudo Freudian glosses on his actions provided by Leo Peshkov. There is no explicit resolution; but the multiplicity of "solutions" to the character and belief of Carel (unbalanced, neurotic, a mystic, Satanic) and the opposition of the former's terrible apprehension of an accidental universe with the novel's slightly more optimistic conclusion - Pattie enjoys her refugee camp, Anthea Barlow "turns up" to entrance Marcus once more - suggest that the contingent is to be embraced, but in a philosophical rather than a tragic spirit. Like the close of Wuthering Heights, ordinary life has to be lived at ordinary pitch.

Carel's dreadful insights unbalance and pervert him. He shares Iris Murdoch's view that the only real way to be good is to be good "for nothing"<sup>1</sup>; but cannot use this

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1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 71



intuition in any helpful way. Deep knowledge of the nature of the universe, that "abyss" which Barbara Vaughan in The Mandelbaum Gate sees at its centre, can scar and appal. It is only love which can release the self for the Good, and make sense of the dreadful world we inhabit. It is a token of our spirituality and potential salvation, and thus, as previous sections will have indicated, is perpetually reflected and examined in Iris Murdoch's morally impelled fiction.

Just as to behave well is portrayed as a difficult and unending process, so love, as opposed to the snare of sex, is hard and painful. It entails clarity of vision of the self and the other, and a truthful response to what one sees. Hence, it is not surprising that most characters' efforts at love go astray; but they occasionally experience success, which removes them to another plane of existence. Existence and the self are transposed in the process, so that the individual undergoes a mystical experience which is often described with beauty and power. Diana, 'in Bruno's Dream, becomes, as I have observed, a captive of the sickroom. In her love and feeling for Bruno, her hampering self drops away; and she "attends" to life with a piercing clarity which she has never previously known.

"Diana felt herself growing older and one day when she looked in the glass she saw that she resembled somebody. She resembled Lisa as Lisa used to be. Then she began to notice that everything was looking different. The smarting bitterness was gone. Instead there was a more august and terrible pain than she had ever known before. As she sat day after day holding Bruno's gaunt blotched hand in her own she puzzled over the pain and what it was and where it was, whether in her or in Bruno. And she saw the ivy leaves and the puckered door knob, and the tear in the pocket of Bruno's old dressing gown with a clarity and a closeness which she had never experienced before ..... And the faces of passersby glowed with an uncanny clarity, as if her specious present had been lengthened out to allow of contemplation within the space of a second. Diana wondered what it meant. She wondered if Bruno was experiencing it too .....

"She tried to think about herself but there seemed to be nothing there ..... The helplessness of human stuff in the grip of death was something which Diana felt now in her own body. She lived the reality of death and felt herself made nothing

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by it and denuded of desire. Yet love still existed and it was the only thing that existed."<sup>1</sup>

Her spiritual communion is made possible by her total acceptance of the fact of death. Effingham, in The Unicorn receives similar enlightenment when facing his own death by drowning in the bog.

"Max had always known about death, had always sat there like a judge in his chair facing toward death, like a judge or like a victim. Why had Effingham never realized that this was the only fact that mattered, perhaps the only fact there was? If one had realized this one could have lived all one's life in the light. Yet why in the light, and why did it seem now that the dark ball at which he was staring was full of light? Something had been withdrawn, had slipped away from him in the moment of his attention and that something was simply himself. Perhaps he was dead already, the darkening image of the self forever removed. Yet what was left, for something was surely left, something existed still? It came to him with the simplicity of a simple sum. What was left was everything else, all that was not himself, that object which

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, Bruno's Dream, 1969, pp. 292 - 293



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he had never before seen and upon which he now gazed with the passion of a lover. And indeed he could always have known this for the fact of death stretches the length of life. Since he was mortal he was nothing and since he was nothing all that was not himself was filled to the brim with being and it was from this that the light streamed. This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, this was the love which was the same as death. He looked, and knew with a clarity which was one with the increasing light, that with the death of the self the world becomes quite automatically the object of a perfect love."<sup>1</sup>

Later he forgets his moment of illumination, his perception that once self drops away, the world can be loved in its beauty and light. The metaphor of light is not accidental. My analysis of Iris Murdoch's view of man and moral values showed how, in "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", she depended upon Plato's allegory of the cave and the sun; and here that dependence finds a happy fictional embodiment. Nothing is claimed authorially for Effingham's experience; the fact that he forgets it even undercuts it somewhat. Yet it, and comparable intimations in novels like The Sacred and Profane Love Machine<sup>2</sup>, enable

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1 Iris Murdoch, The Unicorn, p. 198

2 see the examination of Monty's experience of meditation on p.336

CONCLUSION

With Iris Murdoch, the contemporary novel picks up the discarded mantle of the Victorians, and impels itself in a direction both serious and moral. Malcolm Bradbury has commented that few novelists today have the capacity or desire "to represent a serious moral agent"; but this is precisely her intent: she desires to picture the contingent individual immersed in everyday dilemma and dichotomy, to map the minutiae of moral nuance and choice, to expose the inadequacy of theory in human affairs. To desire this is to be close to the view of fiction held by George Eliot, or even Dickens; and her notion that fiction can restore to us some sense of the "density" of our lives is not far removed from the former's stern injunction that the writer must take on the function of a teacher.

I have also urged that she approaches moral values in her fiction in a speculative fashion, again like George Eliot; but it must be stressed that her speculation is far more radical. George Eliot does indeed investigate what is meant by terms such as "a good man"; and portraits like that of Bulstrode in Middlemarch reveal her brilliant insight into the complex tissue of self-interest and altruism which can lie behind the religious approach to life. Iris Murdoch, however, writes not as a disciple of Freud, but as



one deeply informed by his view of life; and this ensures that her view of the moral takes more account of what she sees as man's mechanistic impulses. She is fascinated by what one might term the hinterland between psychology and morality; and novel after novel raises questions concerning the springs of action: they embody the view that it is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle problems of conduct from questions of psychology, though moral values are always allowed dignity and significance.

The novels themselves, with their multiple views of characters and unfolding and surprising plots, by their very process also embody her notion that goodness is a matter of the eventual achievement of a proper perspective. Just as the reader has constantly to refine his notion of a character ("That looked like altruism, but I see now he was deeply forced") so the moral agent has continuously and truthfully to look at life. This often makes the fictions taxing; but helps to convey a proper sense of the difficulty of moral issues. Axel in A Fairly Honourable Defeat hopes that Rupert's projected book will provide him with "a sort of case book of morals like a guide to etiquette"<sup>1</sup>; and this is a tempting way in which to view Iris Murdoch's fiction. It is not prescriptive, however; it does not tell one how to behave; but in the sense that it works over in detail and with intelligence countless moral dilemmas, it provides the reader with data for his moral perceptions and acts.

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 36

Most deeply, it reveals that morality is itself a technique for discovering more about reality;<sup>1</sup> and helps to free concepts such as love, grace and the transcendent for a fuller and less restricted use.

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<sup>1</sup> an intuition expressed by Alexander in A Severed Head, 1967, p. 43

CHAPTER FIVE

DORIS LESSING



## CHAPTER FIVE

DORIS LESSING

Chapter One argued that Doris Lessing's treatment of moral values could most profitably be seen in relation to a number of the proposed categories or models; and indeed many of her works simultaneously treat moral values in a variety of ways. Her early examination of black/white relationships in her African stories or The Grass is Singing, for example, and her portrayal of English society in The Four-Gated City, were aligned with Dickens' criticism of society's misplaced or illusory values.<sup>1</sup> Hence she wrote in these works partially as a critic of society with the didactic purpose of correction. From the very beginning, however, her fictional purpose can also be seen to be more radical than his; for she early mistrusted the domination of absolutes and, moreover, worked to substitute what I have termed an "ethic of feeling" for conventional normative terms and judgements. It was suggested that parts of the Martha Quest sequence display this tendency to <sup>re</sup>phrase what is meant by the term "moral values".<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Mrs. Lessing's conversion to Sufism results in fiction where moral values, as such, are almost irrelevant; for works like Briefing for a Descent into Hell embody the

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1 see pp. 34 - 35

2 see pp. 39 - 42

belief that man-made schemes and judgements are less significant than the mystical experience which may point the way forward from man's fallen state.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, then, from her Marxist beginnings, Doris Lessing arrives at a situation comparable to that of Graham Greene or Muriel Spark, where religious experience is seen as of paramount importance.

Her treatment of moral values is thus many-faceted and evolutionary; and I shall attempt to convey both these aspects in the chapter which follows. Initially, some of her reflections on man and fiction are put forward in order to establish her firm view of committed art. Some aspects of Sufi belief are also stated, so as to provide a context for her strange and exciting late works. The section on black/white relationships which follows looks at some of the African stories and The Grass is Singing. It suggests that the relationships examined here are seen by Mrs. Lessing as a microcosm of a larger society's diseased and perverted state. Her post-Romantic desire for "wholeness" is also observed in these works.

"The Relations of the Individual with the Collective" considers the massive "Children of Violence" sequence; and charts, by means of an examination of the character of Martha Quest, the modern individual's difficult task of forging his own values and working for a better and more wholesome world.

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<sup>1</sup> see pp. 54 - 55

Martha's movement from the world of personal relationships to the "impersonal" world of political action is noted, as is the collapse of her dream that man-made actions and solutions can solve human conflict.

Finally "Apocalypse" looks at the late works where a mystical solution to the problem of existence is poetically and allusively put. Mrs. Lessing's belief in pragmatic courses and modes of approach appears to run parallel to a commitment to realistic fiction; but her acceptance of Sufism releases her latent poetic imagination, so that these late works are rich and suggestive in their indirectness and fantasy.



Man, Fiction and God

One of Iris Murdoch's major preoccupations was to chart the relationship between individual behaviour and schemes of value, to examine the validity of religious or ethical claims to aid conduct. To do so, she concentrated largely on love relationships, so that any moral insights in her fiction were confined to the personal; society, as such, was absent. Doris Lessing, however, is a social writer both in the sense that she consistently sees her art as enabling a new and more wholesome society to evolve, and, too, in that her subject is, in a very real sense, society; the "relations of the individual with the collective". Her relationship with the view of fiction of the Dickens of Bleak House or Oliver Twist is thus clear; and indeed her fictional standards and yardsticks originally derive from nineteenth century fiction, an admiration she shares with Iris Murdoch because of their community of stress on the value and importance of the solitary individual.

Her apprehension of her times is and has always been stark: she has frequently commented on her intuition that human life is nearing the cataclysm, that she feels as if the H bomb were going off "inside her", that the age of mass living is likely to be one of mass destruction. Running parallel to this fear, however, is her consistent need and

desire to aid modern man in his terrible predicament, which finds a fervent and continuous embodiment in both her fictional and non-fictional writing.

In her early essay, "The Small Personal Voice", she expressed many of her fears about the contemporary climate; and encapsulated her notions on the duty and responsibility of art. Dispassionately, she records her intuition that, too often, mass society becomes an amorphous conglomerate, where the individual is swamped in his association with the many. In the face of society's pressure, he becomes an isolated and vulnerable figure; but whereas nineteenth century literature in its humanity and feeling for the individual affirms its faith in man, contemporary literature offers no such prop and stay.

She urges that our cataclysmic times demand a "committed" art. The artist's commitment, however, should spring from a realistic love and feeling for humanity, and a realization of the mutual, if taxing, interdependence of the individual and society, not from superficial adherence to a cause. She stresses the fact that the act of publishing a story or novel "is an act of communication, an attempt to impose one's personality and beliefs on other people."<sup>1</sup> The image of the artist in his ivory tower is thus a dishonest one; and she feels that once the writer experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 16

a sense of responsibility for those he influences by means of his work, he must become a humanist and feel himself to be "an instrument of change for good or for bad".<sup>1</sup> He has, in fact, to be "an architect of the soul", which requires "a vision to build towards"; but that vision cannot be based on illusory idealism or abstractions, but "must spring from the nature of the world we live in".<sup>2</sup>

Currently, she sees literature as falling into two camps which are "the opposite sides of the same coin", neither of which can aid man; for neither is a truthful representation of man and his predicament. On the one hand, she discerns the drab despairing art of a Beckett, locked in upon itself, which portrays man as an "isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary".<sup>3</sup> Its pessimism renders it quite unable to point the steps of its readers forward with hope. On the other, there are the jolly, jaunty Socialist works, produced according to collective formulae for the purpose of propaganda. They see "collective man with a collective conscience"<sup>4</sup>; and indeed possess "a vision to build towards"; but Doris Lessing's moral and artistic scruples are offended by the

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1    ibid, p. 16

2    ibid, p. 16

3    ibid, p. 20

4    ibid, p. 20



formulation of their purpose, since it is inexact and illusory and conceived at far too facile a level to make their commitment and optimism productive. Her rejection of these well-intentioned but clumsy and untruthful works reminds one of her suspicion of causes, isms, ologies, "the ethic of committees", the group mind. All her life, she has asserted, she has had to support causes which "stink", and she has objectively noted "a terrible gap between the public and the private conscience".<sup>1</sup>

The character, Rosemary Baines, in Briefing for a Descent into Hell perhaps best embodies this aspect of her viewpoint, which must have been a significant factor in turning her away from a pragmatic, man-centred political movement like Marxism to a religious view of life. In her letter to Charles Watkins in that novel, Rosemary Baines speaks of how he has proved to be an enkindling force for her: he has, in fact, fulfilled the rôle which his author sees as part of the function of the artist. Her mood when attending his talk (it is to help to secure a more open and creative form of education to supplement the provision of the state) has, however, initially been one of seething anger; for Mrs. Baines is, like her creator, tired of continually supporting causes which bear so little fruit.

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1    *ibid*, p. 19

"I approved of you, the speaker ..... Yet I was seething with rebelliousness, with emotion - why should one always have to sit on hard chairs in a characterless hall to hear ideas discussed, why, when one wants to be a citizen and act with others, does it always have to be like this ....."<sup>1</sup>

Between these two current extremes of naïvely committed and uncommitted art, with their equally deceptive views of man and society, Doris Lessing envisages the possibility of "a resting-point, a place of decision, hard to reach and precariously balanced", from which her "committed" art will spring.<sup>2</sup> She does not, however, lay down prescriptions or judgements which will immutably fix such a delicate and hardly-attained position, suggesting only that,

"The point of rest should be the writer's recognition of man, the responsible individual, voluntarily submitting his will to the collective, but never finally; and insisting on making his own personal and private judgements before every act of submission."<sup>3</sup>

Love and attention to the private-judging and self-responsible individual in his struggle to join usefully with society, and, by implication, the exercise of his own conscience will enable the artist to maintain a fruitful equi-

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1 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, 1973, p.150

2 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 20

3 *ibid*, p. 20

poise between an automatic and superficial "commitment" and autotelic and "useless" art. He will thus be in <sup>the</sup> a position of the writers of the literature of the nineteenth century, whose "warmth ..... compassion" and "love of people" is "a statement of faith in man himself".<sup>1</sup>

Turning back to the nineteenth century, she sees the best vehicle of this simultaneously committed but alert and questioning art as realistic fiction which is, in her view, the high point of prose, and which she defines as follows:-

"I define realism as art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held, though not necessarily intellectually defined view of life that it absorbs symbolism. I hold the view that the realist novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing; higher than and out of the reach of any comparison with expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism or any other ism. The great men of the nineteenth century had neither religion nor politics nor aesthetic principles in common. But what they did have in common was a climate of ethical judgment<sup>e</sup>; they shared certain values; they were humanists. A nineteenth century novel is recognizably a nineteenth century novel because of this moral climate."<sup>2</sup>

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1    ibid, p. 15

2    ibid, p. 14



The novelist, she believes, enjoys immeasurable advantages in reaching his audience, since there is no difficult genre or mode of language to be mastered. He speaks directly with his "small personal voice", asserting thus the vital autonomy of the individual and the responsibility and potential of his art.

"The novelist talks, as an individual to individuals, in a small personal voice. In an age of committee art, public art, people may begin to feel again a need for the small personal voice; and this will feed confidence into writers and, with confidence because of the knowledge of being needed, the warmth and humanity and love of people which is essential for a great age of literature."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Lessing's terrifying apprehension of the current split between the individual and his society and her perception of the current inadequacy of the novel, leads her to advocate a return to the realistic fiction of the nineteenth century. Her stress on the duty, conscience and responsibility of the artist are, as I have observed, comparably traditional. But she sees that the position of the contemporary novelist is also distinct from that of many nineteenth century writers, for it permits no rest or reliance on absol-

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 27

ute standards since, "Living in the midst of this whirlwind of change, it is impossible to make final judgments or absolute statements of value."<sup>1</sup>

But while what she advocates at this stage of her development appears to be a sturdy pragmatism, based itself on a firm and realistic grasp of man and "the nature of the world we live in", she also affirms a more intangible faith in the future. She expresses her belief in the evolution of a "new man"; and thus discloses man's touching inability to live entirely in the present or to ground views of his conduct and potential in his apparent nature. She also intimates by this vision that a religious approach to life will, ultimately, alone satisfy her. She comments:-

"I am convinced that we all stand at an open door, and that there is a new man about to be born, who has never been twisted by drudgery; a man whose pride as a man will not be measured by his capacity to shoulder work and responsibilities which he detests, which bore him, which are too small for what he could be; a man whose strength will not be gauged by the values of the mystique of suffering."<sup>2</sup>

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1    ibid, p. 20

2    ibid, p. 17

In this essay, Doris Lessing welcomes the responsibility of the artist to influence his public; she anticipates a warm and immediate communion between the two, which is indeed the characteristic of much of her fiction.<sup>1</sup> A modified commitment is embraced in the service of the evolution of the "new" man. Fiction is not, however, to be merely "communication", nor the handmaiden of its "message"; as her comments (in the same essay) on the predicament of the Soviet writer and her insistence that art should not stand aside for life reveal.<sup>2</sup> Her employment of the metaphor of "balance" of the position of the properly committed artist indicates her awareness of the difficult nature of the enterprise. His feeling for and honest perception of the individual will alone maintain the equilibrium between a naïve commitment and a despairing isolation; and this contention is borne out by aspects of her own work. I shall later argue that in the short story, Hunger, the urge to commitment and the simple statement of a moral message has unbalanced the work.<sup>3</sup> In the Martha Quest sequence, too, her vision of individual characters occasionally wavers, so that parts of that sequence do not maintain the equipoise she so earnestly seeks.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for her espousal of realistic fiction confirm Iris Murdoch's link between its

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1 anon., "Shared Experiences", The Times Literary Supplement, Sept. 22nd, 1972, p. 1087

2 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 21

3 see pp. 411 - 13

4 see p. 437



"open" form and the liberal theory of personality. It also corroborates one's own perception that a significant relationship exists between the form of a novel and the artist's view of man and moral values within the work.

An examination of Doris Lessing's fiction reveals, however, that she has by no means consistently written realistic novels. Her later work is, I have suggested, strange and fantastic, while The Golden Notebook, written in mid-career, portrays different strands and levels of experience by means of its different notebooks, and a form which is non-straightforward and puzzling. I should like to suggest that these departures from realism are more than creative experiments, however. It is very tempting to see The Golden Notebook as a pivotal work for its author; for not only does it seem to embody in its fragmented form the split within Anna Wulf's psyche, but it also epitomizes its author's sense of struggle in homogenizing disparate materials and her uncertainty over values. One wonders, too, if it signals her dissatisfaction with the potential of realistic fiction. I have already suggested that the seeds of her religious conversion are present in facets of her early views, in her despair at man's nature, for example, or her impassioned optimism over the evolution of the "new" man. Doris Lessing seems to have grown to her spiritual insights over a considerable period of time, while her religious development forms a fascinating parallel to her increasing experiments with the forms of fiction. Her

gradual rejection of man-centred ideologies and viewpoints, the movement from the struggle for concrete and "realistic" ends to an acceptance of a larger, less self-directed purpose, entails a simultaneous freeing from the mundane and man-centred genre of realistic fiction, which she originally saw as flexible and eminently fitted to her purpose; and she arrives at a very rich and poetically multi-layered style as she arrives at Sufism. That style, moreover, evocatively suggests realms beyond the temporal.

Central to her movement towards Sufism was surely her tragic insight into the tension between the individual and the mass society which surrounds him; for that religion emphasizes, in her view, the essential wholeness of the "human community"<sup>1</sup>; and thus satisfies what is to her a fundamental need.

Sufism<sup>2</sup> is a complex term which Idries Shah himself warns it is difficult for those in the West to come to grips with.<sup>3</sup> It was applied in the second century of Islam to men and women who adopted an ascetic or quietistic way of life; and was originally a practical religion, rather than a speculative system. Doris Lessing herself comments that

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1 Doris Lessing, "If You Knew Sufi ....." The Guardian, Jan. 8th, 1975, p. 12, col. I

2 I am indebted to The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1964, vol. 21, pp. 523 - 524 for the account which follows, except where other sources are acknowledged.

3 see his essay "The Study of Sufism in the West" in The Way of the Sufi, 1975, pp. 13 - 37

it is "the product of a certain form of specialisation thousands of years old: the discovery of specific laws and their application". The "Way" is thus designed to enable man to break from his present prison and to live fully and fruitfully here and now.<sup>1</sup>

Sufi views were spread by wanderers who lived on alms, and who emphasized certain Koranic terms, such as dhikr (praise of God) and tawakkul (trust in God), which entailed a renunciation of personal initiative or volition and an acceptance of God's will. Later the movement became mystical rather than quietistic. The attainment of salvation ceased to be its first object; its followers aspired rather to an inward life of dying to the self and living in God.

Between 900 and 1100 A.D., various manuals of Sufi theory and practice were devised, all of which emphasize the discipline and process of purgation the soul must undergo before it can attain to the contemplative life. The traveller to God must pass initially through a number of stations, such as repentance, poverty, or trust in God. Afterwards, he reaches various "states" of spiritual feeling, such as fear, hope or love. Finally, he may attain contemplation and intuition. The strange "inner" voyage of Charles Watkins in Briefing for a Descent into Hell relates, I think, to these ideas, as I hope to show in my examination

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1 Doris Lessing, "If You Knew Sufi . . . .", p. 12, col. I



of that novel. Sufism has been influenced both by Christianity and Buddhism; and the process of purgation I have just described relates interestingly to Iris Murdoch's notions on man's difficult progress to the Good, a concept which she postulates as a helpful point of reflection for the moral life.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Doris Lessing and Idries Shah both stress ground common to Sufism and other religious viewpoints.

Briefly stated, some of the movement's leading principles are that God is the sole reality and above all names and definitions; he is not only absolute being, but also absolute good and beauty. The phenomenal universe came into being since it is the nature of beauty to desire manifestation; but because things are only known by their opposites, the phenomenal universe reflects being as in a mirror: it has itself no more reality than a shadow cast by the sun. This concept can perhaps be linked with that aspect of Sufism as it appears in Turkish and Persian poetry, where the tendency emerges to abolish the distinction between good and evil since "the latter is nothing but an aspect of not-being and has no real existence."<sup>2</sup> Later, I shall attempt to reveal a similar tendency in Doris Lessing's late fiction, where normative concepts appear to drop out of the frame.<sup>3</sup>

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1 see Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'", p. 69

2 Encyclopaedia Britannica, p. 524

3 see pp 497 - 498

That innate need within Doris Lessing to work for man's betterment, to which reference has already been made, has plainly found a happy resting place in Sufism's view that man can escape his current prison and develop, but that he can do so only as part of the human community, which is a whole, an organism. In her article on Idries Shah, she in fact comments that it is man's "duty" to develop; "more, this duty is the reason for man's presence on earth".<sup>1</sup> Her acceptance of this compulsion is hauntingly echoed in one of Charles Watkins' strange conversations with Doctor Y, where the latter modestly claims not to aim as "high" as God, only to be dauntingly informed by Watkins, "'Stupid. You don't have a choice.'"<sup>2</sup>

She adds that when man forgets this obligation, degeneracy sets in; he becomes uselessly pre-occupied with material possessions and omits to pay the reverence which is due to the Superior Being who created him for a purpose.

She also comments that Sufism can be taken in religious terms (which are the terms I have used in my explanation of it) or viewed as one would view a science or a craft. It can even be taken "within the kind of thinking that space fiction has made familiar"<sup>3</sup>; clearly it is this

1 Doris Lessing "If You Knew Sufi . . . . .", p. 12, col. I

2 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 137

3 Doris Lessing, "If You Knew Sufi . . . . .", p. 12, col. I

mode of thought which characterizes much of Briefing for a Descent into Hell and The Memoirs of a Survivor, where her philosophical and artistic concerns fuse in her innovative and perceptive exploitation of the genre of space fiction. Comparably, she terms Sufism an evolutionary concept; for there is, as it were, a "current" or "cosmic force" operating from elsewhere to which man can learn to attune himself "and thus ally himself with the development of the human community". These metaphors are again central to Martha and Lynda's experience in The Four-Gated City<sup>1</sup> and to the two works just instanced.

Sufism is not a system which is best communicated by books; for "a great part of it must be personally communicated by means of an interaction between the teacher and the learner"<sup>2</sup>; so that Mrs. Lessing has herself been Idries Shah's pupil. Sufis have, however, worked to adapt the written word to convey aspects of their thought; and their choice of form has been catholic. They have employed religious or romantic poetry, jokes, legends,<sup>3</sup> while many of the examples in Shah's own collections resemble some New Testament parables. Their intention is not to convey a single message; but to provide the reader with help.

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1 see pp.486 - 487

2 Idries Shah, op. cit., p. 29

3 ibid, p.30



As the Sufi sage comments in "Vehicle", the question is not, "'How many ways can I understand this, and why can I not see it in only one way?'" The question is rather 'Can this individual profit from what he is finding in the tales?'"<sup>1</sup> Shah himself speaks of different "faces" to a work, and compares its "demonstration" to a "kaleidoscopic effect"<sup>2</sup>, where the turning or re-orientating of the work, or the point of view, yields another facet. This is, in my view, an apt description of Doris Lessing's approach and achievement in Briefing for a Descent into Hell and The Memoirs of a Survivor; for they are many-layered and poetically rich works, which set up a multiplicity of suggestions in the reader's mind, as I hope to demonstrate later.<sup>3</sup> They are thus a striking development from her direct and concrete beginnings; for they play with concepts and images, sometimes in the manner of traditional stories for children, where the fairy tale or fable or legend grants tantalizing glimpses of the deep realities beneath its seductive and apparently simple surface. Though ostensibly immersed in Charles Watkins' mind in Briefing for a Descent into Hell, it is, I think, the author who urges, "We may play with the idea - why not? Gnats may sing to kings, and their songs have to be guessing games."<sup>4</sup> But this finding of direction by indirection

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1 Idries Shah, Thinkers of the East, 1977, p. 53

2 Idries Shah, The Way of the Sufi, p. 29

3 see p. 494

4 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 108

comes later; and it is at her clear-cut and intelligently didactic beginnings that I want to look now; her moral criticism of African society through her examination of black/white relationships.

Black/White Relationships

Though Mrs. Lessing is clearly aware of her good fortune as a writer in being placed in the forefront of the battle for Africa,<sup>1</sup> she has consistently denied that she is or has been concerned with the black/white confrontation per se. She insists that the issue for her is but one more example of "the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun", so that her African stories or even The Grass is Singing should be looked at as portrayals of human relationships, rather than exempla for the debate on racial prejudice. This stress on the community and identity of human suffering reveals her far-reaching and sympathetic vision of life; and reminds one, as I shall later observe, that while her African works may contain implicit moral criticism, they are not shallow polemics. Mrs. Lessing's imagination is always fed by experience; and it is not usually characteristic of her to employ the human to make a case. Her criticism thus springs from that point of "balance" which I outlined in the preceding section. Yet the context of these works, that particular, idiosyncratic, and to English eyes, strange frame, which exercises a peculiar distortion on the relationships within it, and the moral issues it throws up, is significant; and seems to me to be best treated

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1 see the preface to the 1964 edition of her African Stories



separately from her other work. I therefore choose to begin my examination of her fiction with her treatment of the black/white relationship, concentrating particularly on The Grass is Singing.

The short story, in particular the long short story is a form for which Doris Lessing has an especial affection; and her African stories display feeling and craft of some distinction. They are characterized by a dispassionate and ironic attention to things as they are, both human and natural, which is invaluable to her in the development of her moral insight and sense of justice. Landscapes and individuals pass before the reader's eyes to be enjoyed for themselves and as aids to more abstract reflection; so that a simple but effective story like A Sunrise on the Veld appeals largely because of its impact, the achieved sense of the presence of Africa, yet can also encourage thought on the responsibility implicit in terrestrial situations. The buck in that story, destroyed because of a damaged leg which makes it prey to ants, is both horrifically actual and symbolic; it is a means for the boy who sees it of inculcating a moral lesson, that thoughtless acts - the random shot in the veld - have consequences. Doris Lessing is inescapably aware of the chain of causation in these stories, and simultaneously concerned that the situations

which face many of her characters, while often not of their making, do not admit of simple or quick solution. In these respects, she is again comparable to Iris Murdoch; and in their fiction, both writers dispassionately record their insight that acts have consequences, which are frequently harmful, but which cannot be avoided.<sup>1</sup> In the face of the random sequence of life, both, too, advocate a clear-sighted vision on the part of the individual of what he is about, and the acceptance of the responsibilities presented to him, whether willed, chosen, or fortuitous.

It is worth looking at A Home for the Highland Cattle and Hunger to chart in more detail some of the skills and preoccupations these stories display.

A Home for the Highland Cattle demonstrates absurdly the impossible nature of the black/white relationship in contemporary Africa, and reminds the reader of that salutary moral truth that good will and intentions are not enough. It also demonstrates that untried and inexperienced idealism finds a hard testing ground in Africa. Marina, a recent emigrant from England, has "advanced" views on the treatment of the native; the narrative exactly disproves their accuracy and validity, and exposes the consequences of her "spoiling" of her servant, Charlie, who, instead of remaining

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<sup>1</sup> see p. 285

secure in the feudal relationship of master/servant ends as a guest of her majesty "fed and housed, free, for a fortnight" at least.

The brilliantly-selected focus for the conflicting needs and attitudes of the protagonists in the story is the old-fashioned painting of the shaggy highland cattle. It is an object of deep sentiment for Mrs. Skinner, the landlady, whose views on the issue of colour are correspondingly traditional; to Marina it is a symbol of the ugly and moribund, and a reminder to her of her migrant status, and to Charlie and the Africans, it provides a representation of these "fine" cattle by which their wealth and importance was once measured. All parties are regarded alike by their author with a wry but clear-sighted amusement; Marina's pretensions are exposed as shallow, her shrillness guyed by the comic pantomime performed by Charlie. The sentimental ignorance on which her enlightenment rests is exposed, as are its disturbing consequences. Charlie would much prefer to deal, initially at least, with Mrs. Skinner, since then he would know where he stood; and Marina's well-meaning wage increases and gifts, far from ushering in a new era of joy and amity, are viewed with suspicion, or treated as an invitation to exploitation. Doris Lessing discloses the mixed motives behind Marina's idealistic actions, not by explicit and heavy-handed commentary, but by the character's



own deeds; her baulked reactions at the Africans' response to her "goodness", her annoyance at their "irresponsible" behaviour. Like many characters in Iris Murdoch's fiction, she desires the rosy glow which the knowledge of a good action brings; she desires to obtain "energy" and power from her "goodness".

Yet the insensitivity of Mrs. Skinner, beautifully epitomized by her hard, unlovely exterior, is demonstrably callous. She and Charlie may exist in a firm relationship; but it is an exploitative one, with fines and punitive action enforcing the code, and concealing its corrupt and evasive foundation. Her knowledge of Charlie may be more accurate than Marina's; but it is a belittling and derogatory insight, where every act of his is seen as an attempt (which the story ironically discloses it may be) to abuse the "paternal" relationship of master and servant, or as an expression of a feckless inability to cope with life. Where Marina's view of Charlie is mistakenly idealistic, Mrs. Skinner's is wickedly reductive. In no case, does any party succeed in seeing the other as an individual; instead he becomes an example of a race or a rôle.

With a scrupulous objectivity, Doris Lessing refuses an easy, sentimentalizing approach to Charlie and the other Africans; she grants them the dignity of being treated as individuals, not types or cases. She records the buying

of his red satin garters with something of the accuracy of George Eliot describing Fred Vincy's horse dealing; indeed, Charlie and Fred are comparable in these irresponsible and short-sighted actions. They are both endearingly human, too. African sexuality (markedly differentiated from white sexual mores and attitudes) is clearly recorded, while a real and honourable attempt is made to render the remoteness of African psychology. The highland cattle come to rest in Theresa's father's miserable shack, a symbol of inadequate and ridiculous reparation for the theft of African land, uncommented upon by the author. But the image of this once-proud figure seated in the dust and dirt of the settlement, and the knowledge of the ridiculous mess which white interference, however well-meant, has made of the relationship of Theresa and Charlie, bite into the reader's brain; so that he sees the situation not only as itself morally confused, but also as the product of base and erroneous values. Marina proceeds, with some difficulty, to "forget" the imprisoned Charlie and the pregnant Theresa; she is becoming acclimatized to the harsh reality of African society. The one hopeful and positive note is her husband's efforts to teach the Africans to farm properly and thus save their land, though this is complicated by his bewilderment over African psychology and their attitude to nature.

It would be unwise to claim overmuch for this simple story, yet it neatly and characteristically sums up Mrs.

Lessing's concern with black/white relationships, and her tragic apprehension that the only meaningful relationship in contemporary Africa is based on power. Situation, characterization and simple direct language are harnessed to achieve an effect quite distinct from that of a documentary; yet the ironical working out of the narrative is enjoyed less for its formal than its meaningful aspects, an emphasis foreign to many practitioners of the short story. That is, Mrs. Lessing is less concerned with the artefact than with what it may reveal. The actuality of the presentation, and the close and excellent observation on which it rests, however, remove any accusation of polemical or naively "committed" writing; Doris Lessing hence achieves that "balance" for which she continuously struggles. Yet the skill with which she has selected her central situation tends to conceal the artfulness of the story; and there is a sense in which it turns out for the reader as observed rather than created truth. She is not constructing exempla to carry on a moral debate; but there is a marriage of imaginative power and intelligent choice reminiscent of George Eliot, so that her characters do not demonstrate moral truths and are not schematized, yet stand in a close relationship to issues and larger concerns, a relationship closer than that achieved by most fiction. This seems to me a considerable achievement and one which, as I have indicated, the deceptively simple surface of the story helps to conceal. It is also an achievement which points forward to her approach in the Martha Quest sequence.<sup>1</sup>

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1 see p.444



There are many other stories which one could employ to document her skill in creating actuality of characterization, vivid and moving settings, and situations which enhance the "claritas" of her meaning. They demonstrate an active intelligence working on the material of her African experience, not to embody truisms, such as the ill-treatment of the Africans, but to evoke individuals in their solidity and dignity (such as the chief in The Old Chief) or to place them in relation to her awareness of the potential of life. In The Black Madonna, she shows by effective contrast of white, black and Italian attitudes, the dimensions of life which man can attain, pitying in this story not black, but white, because of the rigorous casing of custom and code which denies truth of feeling and imagination. The ideal world for Mrs. Lessing celebrates, at this stage one suspects, a marriage of feeling and intellect, a place where affectionate bonds are confirmed by intelligent choice and commitment.

Yet there is at times a tendency in her employment of the short story, confirmed by the nature of the medium itself (its compression and limited scope, for example) to document or prove issues, to select situation and character in such a way that they can demonstrate her awareness of injustice, or suffering. Hunger is an apt example of this weakness.

She has herself admitted that this story is something of a test case, a means of proving that a clear-sighted apprehension of issues could be made to work, a return to the moral clarity of a Dickens. This hunger for a simple acceptance of right and wrong, the illustration of basic truths is characteristic of the early Doris Lessing; for in her desire for the good end, she tends to over-simplification. Her plea for a point of "balance" in contemporary fiction between committed and uncommitted art, to which I have made several references, is perhaps, partially, an acknowledgement of her own potential flaw.<sup>1</sup> Stories like Eldorado, Hunger and The Ant Heap (their titles themselves a warning signal) seem less to explore experience than to demonstrate singlemindedly and simplistically the relationship between individual cases and general rules, a tendency denied in A Home for the Highland Cattle and in her better work. In these stories she schematizes according to diagram rather than picture; and while her moral insight is clear, her literal approach prevents a subtle and complex embodiment of what may be an important truth.

Hunger is the tale (she herself declares it to be the only "possible" plot) of an intelligent village African who desires the broader life of the city. He is portrayed as wanting something beyond himself, yet lacking direction and focus. Once in the city, he becomes aware of the rival claims of the easy debauched life, and the dedicated exist-

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1 see pp. 391 - 392

ence of those who work for the betterment of his race, "the men of light". The plot actualizes his dilemma, but, despite his prison sentence, he finally accepts the hard way of education and enlightenment. Such polarization would not be out of place in a morality play and, sadly, the characterization and plot are so simple as to simply confirm such a straightforward view of issues. Indeed, it is difficult to accept any of the characters as in any way credible; and while one could not accuse Doris Lessing of dishonesty, there is a lack of felt life which renders the story dull and unlikely. Situations are stated and characters reported with clarity, but without imaginative power; and the sole interest of the story resides in her attempt to convey the intelligence of an uneducated person, which is a failure, I think, but an honourable one.

Hunger in fact discloses one of her early faults, the occasional lack of any really subtle imaginative apprehension of the complexity of experience. She notes complexity with her intelligence, and can therefore state her awareness of its presence, but cannot always fully embody it. The frenzied perception which Dickens has, for example, of the complexity and inter-connecting destinies of life in a city is quite foreign to her.<sup>x</sup>

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x One wonders if her African and non-metropolitan background is partially responsible for this lapse?



One feels she is also, at this stage, something of a victim of her plain and direct style and her view of fiction, neither of which rescue her from her predicament. Her initial espousal of realism was partially a response to an ethically determined problem, that of removing modern man from his current slough; and perhaps this does not always mesh fully with the deeper springs of her creativity. Paradoxically, however, her plain, low-key style, which can lessen the impact of her novels, is brilliantly successful in the autobiographical works, Particularly Cats and In Pursuit of the English, where it lays out experience in a manner both direct and illuminating. It is comparably effective in The Grass is Singing.

Bernard Bergonzi is one of the few critics to write well of Doris Lessing, and indeed she is a novelist who in some curious way appears to deny footholds to criticism.<sup>1</sup> He comments that The Grass is Singing is a kind of modified fable, arguing that Mrs. Lessing learned much initially from D. H. Lawrence and is, in fact, like him, an essentially didactic writer.<sup>2</sup> He is, I think, right to detect a significant difference between this novel and her other works, for it enjoys a formal economy which was not, initially, habitual to her and which is one of her happiest achievements. It seems to me less a fable than a novel of obsession, where

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1 see for example Gillian Tindall's strictures in Contemporary Novelists, 1972.

2 Bernard Bergonzi, "In Pursuit of Doris Lessing", New York Review of Books, February 11th 1965, vol. 4, pp. 12-14

the pared-down and typed is permissible in order to convey the scale of the demented passion within it. The Grass is Singing, unlike some of Mrs. Lessing's other work, provides a suitable "objective correlative" for many of her deeply cherished beliefs and feelings; it is a work where the form totally absorbs the feelings and preoccupations which went into its creation, unlike Hunger, for example, where the story neither well embodies her sense of racial injustice nor explicates the force of those feelings which largely sustain it. Here, escaping that over-preoccupation with ends which she criticizes in *Martha Quest*, she can concentrate on the immediate and actual, exploring a superbly chosen situation which becomes a metaphor for her African experience and black/white relationships.

The simplicity of the novel is marked. Despite its narrative structure (it begins with Mary's death and then hunts for the significance of her murder), which is itself a welcome change from Mrs. Lessing's overly plain tales which occasionally appear to tell themselves, it is fundamentally the story of the relationship of three people with Africa; for the land is itself an actor of importance in the drama; and Mary, Dick and, to a degree Moses, struggle with the dictates of their setting. Mary, on whom the burden of the black/white confrontation rests is, for author and reader alike, a type; yet her character is perceptively and cogently rendered, and her author regards her with interest and pity. Freed from the miserable degradation of her childhood, she leads the life of the unfettered, unmarried

white girl of the city, absorbed in a public life whose superficiality removes any need for personal development or reflection. Africa for her is a pleasant garden suburb; climate is regulated by civilized comforts; the native is far off.

Her precipitate marriage is entered into out of shocked vanity and the terror that she is growing old. Her author also sees it as the automatic response to society's pressures; for the cruel comments of others reveal that she can no longer play the rôle of the free young girl<sup>1</sup>; but must marry, not out of individual need, but because she is physically inappropriate to her existing stereotype. Significantly, the gossip she overhears also reveals that she is "not like that"; for her acquaintances are aware of her sexual oddity. The revelation increases Mary's pathos for the reader and hints at the ensuing tragedy. Her marriage is, however, not only a union with Dick, but also with the natives and Africa. Romantically, she imagines that living on the farm will enable her to "get close to nature". Doris Lessing drily uncovers the useless and dangerous nature of such a sentimental abstraction; and Mary's arrival at her new home is described as a frightening experience.

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1 Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1974, pp. 41 - 42



"Mary got out of the car and watched it drive away round the house to the back. She looked round her, shivering a little, for a cold breath blew out of the trees and down in the vlei beyond them hung a cold white vapour. Listening in the complete silence, innumerable little noises rose from the bush, as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful at their coming and were now going about their own business ..... Then a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees."<sup>1</sup>

Doris Lessing is not merely describing the inevitable shock any town dweller would experience in a confrontation with rural life, though there is an element of this in Mary's terror. The African bush must, after all, be a chastening experience for those who are unprepared for it. What she is also concerned to describe, though, is, as Mary realizes, the "hostile breath" of "another world"<sup>2</sup>, the world of natural impulses and forces of which her heroine has largely been ignorant. These impulses are not only large and far-reaching, however, they also enjoy a local manifestation in man's physical nature; and Mary's encounter symbolizes her

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1 Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1972, pp. 62 - 63

2 Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1974, p. 54

meeting with her physical self, knowledge of which she has largely pushed down and out of sight, with repercussions I shall discuss later.

Once the novelty of farm life and her new marriage has worn off, Mary becomes obsessed with the physical facts of her existence - the heat, the dust, the waiting for rain. She is portrayed as an uneasy settler in a place she can neither tolerate, understand nor love. Her battle with Africa and her physical nature has been joined.

"She had been out of the rhythm of cold and heat and rain. It had been hot, it had rained, the cold weather had come - yes, certainly; but it was something extraneous to her, something happening independent of her. Here body and mind were subservient to the slow movement of the seasons; she had never in her life watched an implacable sky for signs of rain, as she did now, standing on the verandah, and screwing up her eyes at the great massed white clouds, like blocks of glittering crystal quartz sailing through the blue."<sup>1</sup>

Like Lawrence, Mrs. Lessing creates a poetic and mystical correspondence between Mary's horror of the land and her frigidity; in a manner reminiscent of, though less highly developed than that of The Rainbow, she discloses

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<sup>1</sup> ~~ibid, p. 85~~ Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1972, p. 85.

that the rejection of the physical data of existence are also a denial of sexuality. Neither Mary nor Dick are physically or sexually well balanced. Both characters are, significantly, portrayed as thin and strained; they exist largely by virtue of their wills; their bodies have no loveliness, and their sexual relationship appears as something to be "got through". Nor does that relationship bear fruit. Mary's late plans for a child are denied by Dick on financial grounds; but the novel shows that her frantic desire is a desperate clutching at yet another illusion and not an expression of a real physical need or instinct. Her author's scrupulous knowledge of Freud and man's genetic inheritance site the reasons for Mary's horror of the physical in her relationship with her father and her knowledge of her parent's sexuality. His maleness and the glimpse of his sexual relations with her mother terrified her when young; and she fled to the city to escape both male physical dominion and her squalid childhood. Once there, her public life of tennis and the office and platonic relationships effectively conceded the physical basis of life.

Moses alone in the story (if one excepts the other Africans) is at ease with the physical; he is portrayed as able to forget body and self, becoming almost an inert mass propped against a door. But his absence of sexual strain is not, in this novel, regenerative, for the situation of Africa means that he is inevitably set on a collision course with the whites.



In the characterization of the tormented Mary and the spiralling obsession of her relationship with Moses lies the book's strength; but the portrayal of Dick, the seemingly reliable and hard-working, yet innerly romantic and incapable, is masterly and exact. Doris Lessing has rendered his peculiar kind of unstable optimism before (in stories like Eldorado, for example); and perhaps the type reaches its perfection in Mr. Quest. Dick is a meet foil for Mary; they create a union which is predictably doomed from the outset. The interest and skill of the characterization reside in the way in which she is able to unite seemingly disparate or discordant qualities, and to objectify these by means of Dick's physical nature. Like Mary, he is unformed, emotionally immature, a dreamer: his dream has been to escape from the constraints of office and city to the "freedom" of the land, a delusion as potent as any experienced by any character in a novel by Iris Murdoch. Once "free" he becomes the victim of an obsessive vision, denying himself tobacco, drink and any thoughts of marriage for the sake of his farm. He dreams that he will "one day" marry when he can treat his wife properly. He anticipates "spoiling" her, and the building of a fine house.<sup>1</sup> Such dreams appear harmless enough, but they have little connection with reality; for Dick is unsuccessful and poor. His sensible perception that no woman could be expected to share his life as it is escapes him in the pressure of his loneliness; and he and Mary share a common need in their

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1974, pp. 48 - 49

hurried marriage as they share a common delusion about each other's natures. Tragically, both erroneously see the other as self-reliant and competent.

Dick refuses to farm economically, being devoted to yet another illusion, an abstract notion of "good farming" which also helps to destroy him. His author reveals, however, that his standards are in themselves good ones; they are merely inappropriate for his situation. She also ironically shows that his wealthy neighbour, Charlie Slatter, erodes his farm and, ultimately, Africa, in a way which shocks and appals the reader; and this juxtaposition of the poor, but "good" farmer with the wealthy and ruthless exploiter of land displays Mrs. Lessing's perception of the complexity of experience, where to be "right" may be costly and dangerous.

Dick's "fads", his grasping at straws like bee-keeping, gradually expose his instability; his wife begins to detect his weakness at the same time as she observes his taut hands on the steering wheel, the lines of strain. It is his physical collapse (the result, it is implied, of a rigour beyond sense) which precipitates the crisis; for it sends Mary to the fields to manage the hands, where her fatal fit of temper causes her to strike Moses. From this point, Dick as an individual is eclipsed; gradually the male/female relationship (never in the least satisfactory) devolves

upon Moses and Mary; and since it is a relationship which transcends the barrier of colour, it can only end tragically.

Dick does, however, make one last appeal to Mary before her fatal involvement with Moses. Mary, after his refusal to give her a child, has sunk into a neurotic apathy; she sits for hours doing and saying nothing, with only spasmodic periods of remission. To rouse her from her despair and provide himself with a fresh spur to renew his struggle with the land, Dick asks her to come out on to the farm with him. Reluctantly, she complies, only to have the scales fall painfully from her eyes as she perceives the full extent of the awful truth about the farm and her own and Dick's situation.<sup>1</sup> Such clarity of vision is appalling to her, particularly when it is coupled with Dick's rejection of her constructive suggestions. Their new unity of purpose ironically exacerbates her suffering, and renders her collapse even more inevitable.

Mrs. Lessing ably demonstrates her compulsive awareness of the cyclical nature of human affairs by allowing Mary to see her miserable marriage as reminiscent of the downward spiral which marked her parent's union. For her it is as if her father from his grave had "forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother live". Later,

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 144



too, when her sexual attraction for Moses has become obsessive, she dreams repeatedly of her father and his, to her, terrifying masculinity; and Moses frequently treats her as the child she fundamentally still is. Her relationship with both Dick and Moses dementedly echoes the first thwarted one with her father.

The descent to the tragedy is slowly and admirably documented; Doris Lessing removes any possible charge of implausibility by the exactness of her descriptions of the situation and the objective charting of character. The focus for her examination, the male/female, white/black relationship begins as a study of power; but she early reveals the sexual implications which underlie such a relationship and, indeed, the colour bar; and the entwining of these two aspects is subtle and accurate.

Mary slashes Moses with the whip initially to assert an unsure domination; she then experiences fear because of his physical strength and, by implication, his maleness. Forced to accept him as her houseboy, she governs her habitual irritation with black servants and is as "impersonal" as she can be; but her fascination with him festers, and becomes an obsession with his physique. Moses is as unlike the thin, whipcord taut Dick as he could be. He is physically handsome; and Mary follows his form with her eyes in an unconscious attraction, which is subtly apparent to the

reader. Indeed, as I have implied,<sup>1</sup> there is something of a contrast within the novel between African physicality and the "willed" and neurotic approach to life of both Dick and Mary, so that Mary's attraction is also a fascination with what is lacking in herself. This contrast reminds one of Graham Greene's interest in the primitive in Journey Without Maps; for one of the reasons for his pilgrimage to Africa was his search for a level of living "beyond the cerebral", which might be regenerative, while he, too, like Doris Lessing, is deeply aware of and sceptical about the "weariness of willing".<sup>2</sup>

"She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her .... as he swept or scrubbed or bent to the stove, his muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split. He appeared even taller and broader than he was, because of the littleness of the house."<sup>3</sup>

The plane of their relationship is altered by Mary's accidental sight of Moses shaving; both are shocked and angered because, the author suggests, the personal has entered their relationship: each has seen the other as an individual. Such a vision cannot be, as it might in many human relationships, rewarding or fruitful; for the society

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1 see p. 419

2 see p. 65 - 69

3 Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1972, p. 175

in which Moses and Mary live can only exist at a stereotyped level. If Marina's superficial efforts to see her servant, Charlie, as an individual in A Home for the Highland Cattle aggravated an already fraught situation, individual communion here is dangerous. Doris Lessing does not comment that the physical or sexual has also become explicit after this scene; but it is now clear that Mary sees Moses as a man, and, though she is unaware of it, a splendid man. Initially, however, he is offended that she has seen him as an individual and a male; but his subsequent actions surely show that he reacts instinctively to this revelation of her femaleness.

In Mary's extremity, Moses takes care of her, commanding her to drink "as if he were speaking to one of his own women"; he puts her to bed, and when he touches her to do so, it is as if the last barrier is removed. The traditional relationship between mistress and servant, which is based on power is at an end; one based on Mary's need now springs up. Mrs. Lessing sees this in Lawrentian terms.

"There was now a new relation between them. For she felt helplessly in his power. Yet there was no reason why she should. Never ceasing for one moment to be conscious of his presence about the house, or standing silently at the back against the



wall in the sun, her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even - though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge - of some dark attraction."<sup>1</sup>

The grounds of Mary's obsession with Moses have now shifted; her latent sexual desire for him is now overt. He becomes her one thought, and in dreams which revert to her childhood terrors of her father, her simultaneous sexual fear and attraction are made manifest. Their final relationship is indirectly described through the eyes of Slatter and the new assistant, which gives it a queer power, and enables the reader to sense the demonic and pathetic nature of Mary's attraction, refracted as it is through these two filters. She is seen, simultaneously, as possessed by her new knowledge of the carnal, a giggling coquette and Moses' slave; and a pathetic hunted creature, terrified of the man who possesses her and of the taboos they both flout. It requires considerable art to render this complex dilemma with such urgency and compression. Realistically, Mary does not descend to death without a struggle. In her terror, she reaches out for the help of Tony, her husband's new assistant; but ultimately, she sees this futile act as but a repetition of her earlier illusory clutching at the salvation of marriage. No one now can rescue her from the tragic consequences of her flouting of custom; "she would

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 190

have to go through with it."

"And it seemed to her, as she looked at his puzzled, unhappy face, that she had lived through all this before. .... long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man..... It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him. And then, she had felt this emptiness when, at last, she had known there was to be no release ..... There was nothing new even in her death ...."<sup>1</sup>

Just before her death, she again struggles in the grip of the terrible climate, longing for rain as she longs for ultimate release from the prison of her loneliness and terror. She mutters that it will rain after she is dead, which the reader accepts as realistic evidence of her unbalanced state of mind, while it also contributes to the larger backdrop of the novel. With her death, rain does in fact come, but the sacrifice of Mary's life does not engender fertility or wholeness (Mrs. Lessing's choice of the extract from "The Wasteland" as an epigraph is surely significant in this connection); she is the, one feels useless, victim of the forces of society, culture and Africa, none of which she has properly appreciated.

Her guilt towards her own race dissolves at the sight of Moses; for she realizes she has been "disloyal, and at

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1974, p. 212

the bidding of the Englishman".<sup>1</sup> She moves forward to appeal to him, but sees the weapon in his hand. Her last thought is that "the bush avenged itself .... The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming."<sup>2</sup> Africa and Moses attain their revenge on poor Mary, the misfit, at the same time, though the novel is not explicit about the reasons for his sense of betrayal. He may act as the deserted male, or the African moving against the white who has flouted the code; and the author closes the novel with speculation on Moses' feelings, leaving him with a final dignity.

"Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say."<sup>3</sup>

To term this novel a story about the colour bar would be inexact and limiting; for though its setting is Africa, that strange land which Mrs. Lessing portrays as the subject of white love, greed and obsession to the doom of African and white alike, and though it gains much of its force from being confined within the constraints of the white/black context, it is primarily, as I have tried to show, a story of human relationships, of those locked off from each other

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1    *ibid*, p. 216

2    *ibid*, p. 217

3    Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1972, p. 256



and their own fulness by the pressure of obsession. There is a continuum between a play like Othello and a novel like Cry, the Beloved Country, on which The Grass is Singing would appear somewhere between the two and much closer to the former work. It would be inappropriate to call Othello a play about racial prejudice, not merely because of its historical situation, but because its concerns are wider than such a judgement allows. Yet that is not to deny that powerful feelings are aroused by the black/white sexual involvement it portrays. Cry, the Beloved Country, on the other hand, is a polemic, a novel directed to a particular end, whereas The Grass is Singing is autotelic in the best sense of that word.

Mrs. Lessing's attitude to her material is characterized by a uniform and stringent charity; she acknowledges and exposes weakness on all sides, pointing often to its derivation; but all her characters are soberly esteemed and accepted for what they are. There is a contrast within the book between the aridity of the white settlers' life and the fecundity of the native village, which is comparable to her portrayal of white and black sexuality. Yet she sees that the native village is a bastardized version of what it was, which exists in a largely parasitical relation to the white farms, and is, perhaps, only marginally preferable to comfortless shacks like Dick's. Just as the central relationships of the novel are deformed, so too are both black and white life styles; and beyond these she puts Africa

in its beauty and dignity, romantically pointing to a potential never achieved and often, it seems, wilfully ignored.

Any treatment of moral issues within the novel and, at her best within the African stories, is implicit, despite the fact that she will comment overtly on what she feels to be particularly invidious if she chooses. Her treatment of the white settlers is a good example of her powerful, but intelligent criticism, where she clearly regards them and their life styles as limited, but resists any attempt to gild or cheaply satirize. So that, while I have aligned her social criticism with Dickens', her slant is less apparent than his; and she mostly allows characters to reveal their own weakness without undue bias or authorial commentary. Her strong appreciation of and sensitivity towards physical beauty is patently offended by the unloveliness of most of the whites within the novel; and, as I have commented, The Grass is Singing conveys a real sense of the need for man to come to terms with and enjoy his physical nature. Their ugliness corresponds in some way with their ugly society; but while she mourns both of these, she does not totally condemn them. The master race are ironically characterized by "a feeling of almost martyred responsibility"<sup>1</sup>; and their unity arises significantly from their sense of the deficiencies of the natives.

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, 1974, p. 27

"They talk about their labourers with a persistent irritation sounding in their voices: individual natives they might like, but as a genus they loathe them. They loathe them to the point of neurosis. They never cease complaining about their unhappy lot, having to deal with natives who are so exasperatingly indifferent to the welfare of the white man, working only to please themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Charlie Slatter represents society to the Turners; to a degree, he performs the same function for the reader. He is not a lovely figure, either physically or mentally; and if he stands for the superiority of the "responsible" race, his nature exposes any idealistic or far-reaching pretensions they express in the novel as ludicrous and inexact. A <sup>r</sup>hated man, he grinds family and worker alike, and has once killed a native in rage; but his author reveals some of the reasons for his oppressive nature by reference to his origins and comments that he is "kindhearted ,,... in his own way"<sup>2</sup>, while he can also be "fair". Charlie, like Mary, Dick and Moses, if unpleasant, is still justly regarded as human. Fallibility is accepted as a characteristic of the human animal. His author does not achieve her moral impact at the expense of the individual.

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1    ibid, p. 80

2    ibid, p. 14



An evil system is shown, however, to have inevitable and disastrous consequences for all human relationships which tend to become either superficial, formal and limited, or obsessive, corrupt, and deformed. The individual cannot see another as he is; his own potential is atrophied; he is divorced from his setting; life degenerates to a wearied and wearying habit. It is significant that no one helps Mary and Moses in their predicament. Dick appears not to notice; Slatter chokes on his rage; the new assistant, fresh to Africa, alone regards them with a kind of pity. Later, he leaves the land, where the pressures of the physical, the social and the cultural are so urgent, for the city. Irretrievably marked by his experience, he drifts from job to job; and he surrenders his early ambition to be a farmer for clerical work. The process of becoming acclimatized to the brutal realities of the master/servant relationship in Africa (which is part of the subject of A Home for the Highland Cattle) has somehow undergone a hiatus for him. It is as if the "almost hysterical look of hate and fear"<sup>1</sup> he has glimpsed on the Sergeant's and Slatter's faces when they look at Mary's body has traumatized him, so that he becomes a drifter. His omission of truth-telling after the murder entails a sort of moral collapse. Yet his movement to a sense of justice, however confused,<sup>2</sup> is the only significant movement towards moral values in the book,

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1    ibid, p. 28

2    ibid, p. 27

if one excepts the vague kindness shown to Mary by the Slatters, which itself appears to be formal, rather than inspired by real feeling, or a sense of concern. After Mary's murder, both Slatter and the Sergeant are deeply anxious that the truth about her betrayal of the white code should not emerge. Moses will be punished for the murder; he is after all the native, who is ever prone to steal, rape or murder. No concept of justice emerges. Tony's feeble attempts to tell the truth about the situation meet with closed ranks; values are, after all, costly, and cannot be bought at the expense of white solidarity. The whites are indeed shown to have gained the whole world, in the sense of power and material possessions, at the cost of their souls.

The past, in the case of both Mary and Dick, exerts its dead hand to twist the present; a misguided society engenders death and madness. The author's sad attention to actuality, however, is not reductive, but, perhaps paradoxically, renders some sense of her insight that such lives are not enough. Doris Lessing maintains in this novel a skilled and discriminating balance between individuals and her sense of those genetic and social forces which have helped to make them what they are. The characters are credible types, their situation well authenticated; and larger issues arise from their cogently rendered predicament. They become apt symbols of man's struggle with his own delusive nature and illusions; they point morally to the

perverted or deluded society which gave them birth. Their predicament also conveys some sense of man's struggle with the absolute dicta of existence. In her scrupulous rendering of these lives she achieves her aim of insisting on the importance of the individual, and of asserting his value. No deus ex machina can save the protagonists or the author from the dictates of the situation; and the reader is not compelled to a foisted-on solution, or impelled to commitment; as is the case with Graham Greene, he recognizes in the tiny resonances of these lives the still sad music of humanity. That is a moral achievement.



The Relations of the Individual with the Collective

Mrs. Lessing's ambition and her inclusive view of the nature of human existence led her in the five volume Martha Quest sequence, aptly subtitled Children of Violence, to attempt to chart "the relations of the individual with the collective". As if prompted by that view of George Eliot's that there is no private life which is not determined by a wider public life, she examines in these works the meshing of the unique feeling individual with the society which shapes and entraps him; she surveys his attempts to work with and for the collective. The reactions of that individual, his sensibility, is the only test of the efficacy and significance of feeling and fact; and, ultimately, he stands almost alone in the face of society's collapse.

Martha Quest, even more typically than Dorothea in Middlemarch, is envisaged by her creator as standing at a particular historical interface; and just as Doris Lessing saw her African experience as the quintessence of twentieth century experience, so Martha's struggles and those of her peers provide a summary of an historical epoch. She is viewed, as her name suggests, as a typical figure, a kind of latter-day pilgrim; and Mrs. Lessing anticipates any possible criticism of an over obsessive concern with the individual in cataclysmic times which invalidate such a pre-occupation, by making Martha and her situation, once more,

a microcosm of the larger world and wider issues. Thus, as the 1972 preface to The Golden Notebook asserts, attention can profitably be paid to individual sensibility; we do not feel and suffer, she suggests, alone.<sup>1</sup> Again we are back, as Iris Murdoch has commented, with the twentieth century's abstract assertion of the value of the personal;<sup>2</sup> but Mrs. Lessing's grasp of the immediate enables her to flesh that abstraction with warmth and sympathy.

She has, as I have observed, an ethical compulsion behind the concentration on the individual<sup>3</sup>, which frequently fuses happily with her pragmatic grasp of experience. This concentration has been compared with Iris Murdoch's focus on the personal<sup>4</sup>; but Mrs. Lessing is not concerned to portray the individual in all his "contingency", for she is powerfully aware of human similarity. She has commented:-

"I don't think we are as extraordinary as we like to think we are. We are more like other people than we would wish to believe. The same people occur again and again in our lives. Situations do ....."<sup>5</sup>

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1 Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook, 1972, p. 13

2 Iris Murdoch, Sartre, p. 76

3 see p. 414

4 see p. 387

5 Florence Howe, "A Conversation with Doris Lessing (1966)", Contemporary Literature, Autumn 1973, vol. 14, p. 429

This insight is dependent, I think, on her perception that man is a product of genetic, biological, historical and social forces, to which reference was made in the study of The Grass is Singing, where the characters and their actions are largely determined by the situation and context which holds them prisoner, while their own inherited natures intensify the confinement. Martha Quest, in the sequence under discussion, is also seen in this light; and the presentation of her character displays an exciting balance between her, as it were, typical face, and the strong grasp of her individuality. As is perhaps to be expected of such a massive sequence, this balance is not, as I have commented, uniformly maintained<sup>1</sup>: occasionally, as was the case with Hunger, Mrs. Lessing's imagination appears to desert her, so that parts of the novels appear as documentary rather than fiction. The account of Martha's political involvement is, at times, less than successful as a result of this. For the most part, however, the fusion is effective, so that the reader enjoys Martha's particular struggles at the same time as he feels he is regarding significant contemporary experience.

Nor is this ability to see the cyclical nature of life and the constants of man's experience in itself reductive, for Mrs. Lessing has always believed that if the individual is small, the totality he inhabits is large. This view finds

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<sup>1</sup> see p. 395



its summation in the Sufi belief that society is a whole, an organism; and is movingly demonstrated in Briefing for a Descent into Hell. It is a view which occasionally touches tragedy in her work, however, particularly in the Martha Quest sequence, where man's efforts to combat his own nature and his environment gradually break down and are seen as non-viable. The rendering of the vast landscape of Africa, which continually and tantalizingly appears and reappears throughout the sequence, perhaps best epitomizes this vision; for there the empty, often arid spaces, dwarf man's endeavours to farm, to garden, to live, as they point ironically to the potential man never achieves. Her sense of and interest in the struggles of the individual with life, and her moral attention to the battles of the individual conscience, in particular, also tellingly aid her non-reductive viewpoint; for she regards these efforts as important and dignified, as did Graham Greene and Iris Murdoch.<sup>1</sup>

I have previously referred to the belief which she expresses in "The Small Personal Voice" that the individual and the artist must make up their own minds on issues, unsupported by ideology or absolute.<sup>2</sup> In that essay, she also comments that the confusion of the modern age has given rise to a situation where words like good and bad can no longer be simply or unselfconsciously employed.<sup>3</sup> This, I

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1 see p. 159 and p. 323

2 see pp. 393 - 394

3 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", pp. 14 - 15

think, helps to explain a further aspect of her view of her heroine, Martha Quest, of whom she is often deeply critical, but who is seldom overtly or directly judged by extended authorial commentary. As in The Grass is Singing, Martha's own deeds and her occasional self-criticism or knowledge expose her inadequacies, which is a method both subtle and effective. It is as if Doris Lessing has accepted Iris Murdoch's advice to do away with "primary" normative words, such as good and right, for example, since they have become useless, employing instead the "secondary moral words" such as "gay, bumptious, trivial", which are themselves an honest attempt to describe things as they are, to "attend" to them, rather than to slot them into pre-existing categories.<sup>1</sup> The gain for the character of Martha Quest is considerable.

Martha's own <sup>^</sup>role throughout the sequence is itself a normative one; she attempts to make sense of and estimate the various situations and settings in which she finds herself and to exercise her "conscience" in her "relations with the collective".<sup>2</sup> She thus stands as something of a persona for the artist; and epitomizes her creator's search for that "balance" which she then saw as pointing the way forward.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", pp. 22 and 42

2 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 22

3 *ibid*, p. 20

Doris Lessing's concern with the predicament of the individual in society was early displayed in a non-pretentious short story, The Other Woman, which faithfully embodies the "them and us" mentality so prevalent in the fifties and sixties. Rose, the heroine, is a victim; her mother is destroyed by a lorry, her home by a bomb, her engagement by inner forces she does not understand. When her home has been wrecked by what is explicitly termed "the machine age", she rejects bitterly and suspiciously all offers of help; "that policeman, officials - they were all noseys parkers, knowing what was best for everybody". Nor is there succour for her in the face of life's intolerable pressures in her father's traditional Socialist politics, which she rejects as childish and out of touch with reality. When the conditions of war-torn England impel her into the arms of a married man, she becomes the "other woman" of the cliché, simultaneously directed into a situation by society and its forces, and labelled and judged within it.

In a brave attempt to "keep up" with her lover she takes to reading the newspapers; but the news of the war depresses and appals her, so she turns to the more "personal". There she encounters her public self.

"'War takes toll of marriage', she would read.

'War disrupts homes'. Then she dropped the paper and sat looking before her, her brow puzzled.



That headline was about her, Rose. And again, she would read the divorces; some judge would pronounce: 'This unscrupulous woman broke up a happy marriage and .....'. Again the paper dropped while Rose frowned and thought. That meant herself. She was one of those bad women. She was The Other Woman. She might even be that ugly thing, A Co-Respondent ..... But she didn't feel like that. It didn't make sense. So she stopped reading the newspapers, she simply gave up trying to understand."<sup>1</sup>

Her encounter with her public self is lightly and ironically treated; yet it forms the centre of the novella and underlines Doris Lessing's serious and even didactic purpose, for which she is prepared to risk the surface verisimilitude of her "realistic" story by employing such an obvious device. For Rose is not alone in her shocked rejection of the clichéd phrase; the tenor of the story is such that the reader is jolted with her, and refuses to accept the stereotyped judgement. To equate Rose with an "unscrupulous woman" is a delicious absurdity; but beyond the humour, the author has made her point about public doctrine and private judging, of the disparity between the public world of action and the private one of feeling, a point

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Other Woman in Five, 1960, pp. 99 - 100

previously made with some definition by Muriel Spark.<sup>1</sup>

Rose's ambiguous status prevents her from adopting the child she loves, which is an aim more meaningful to her than marriage. The novella closes uncertainly; she may, living more regularly, obtain the child, but her author is not optimistic. Society is shown as a pressurizing, constraining agent rather than an enabling one. It prevents timid gooselike Rose from doing the one thing she desires and would be good at. It makes general judgements, blanket assumptions; individuality (so skilfully evoked by the story itself) is swamped and negated.

Mrs. Lessing's concern with and respect for the individual so amply testified to in this story, and in her non-fictional writing, links her very clearly with the three previous writers under examination; for all, either explicitly or by implication, saw the individual as meaningful, and warned of his potential engulfment by totalitarian forces. The Mandelbaum Gate and The Quiet American disclose the divisive nature of state and ideology; they show that groups and factions tend to distort and deform and ultimately to destroy. Iris Murdoch, concentrating in the field of personal relationships, corroborates the view that it is essential to see individuals in all their specificity if one is to act intelligently and morally. Mrs. Lessing's

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1 see pp. 206 - 207

solution to this particularly twentieth century dilemma and theme is not, initially, to advocate a retreat into the self; the peculiar self-immurement which is occasionally portrayed in the Murdoch or Spark universe is not for her. In the Martha Quest sequence (at least until the very close) she endorses the effort of the individual to remain whole and yet to connect with what surrounds him, to accept that we are members one of another with a part to play in society. So Martha continually returns to a notion of responsibility for those around her; she tries and rejects numerous expedients to make the world a more wholesome and reasonable place. Her creator is not sanguine about the success of these endeavours; yet like Martha, she believes that we have to work through what we have been given, a modern and immediate re-alignment of the nineteenth century concept of duty.

In the analysis that follows, I shall proceed largely by means of an examination of the character of Martha Quest, whose developing consciousness is the focus for the multi-form experience of the sequence. The "collective", a term which the author never exactly defines will not be assumed to refer to society alone, since there is an examination of Martha's relation with, for example, ideology and politics, and the theory of psychoanalysis. Mrs. Lessing's stance is a moral one; for the function of this group of novels is both to assert the importance of clear-sighted, honest,



right-judging individuals and to criticize society or abstractions where these prevent wholeness and fulfilment. They also attempt to substitute other terms for traditional normative concepts; for throughout the sequence, there is the assumption that right feeling, rather than punitive codes, is itself moral. Finally, its late stages suggest that man-made pragmatic solutions will not aid the individual in his deadly state; and Mrs. Lessing moves out to her larger religious view.

The beginning of the first novel of the sequence, Martha Quest, is directly analogous to the beginning of Middlemarch; for both Doris Lessing and George Eliot are concerned to describe a particular kind of strained feminine sensibility and to root this in its specific historical, social and geographical environment. Each author sees her heroine's experience and suffering as significant in itself, and in relation to the society which so largely contributes to it. Each, too, I think, sees that it is this particular kind of female in this specific setting who takes much of the strain, as it were, of her society and epoch; and while they are sympathetic to the pressures which Dorothea and Martha endure, they are by no means uncritical of them or their reactions. Both characters are viewed with an affectionate but uncondescending irony, and the novels demonstrate their creators' clarity of vision in their "placing" of

Dorothea, and Martha's idealism. Their portraits illustrate (as did the character of Marina in A Home for the Highland Cattle) George Eliot's and Doris Lessing's sense that good intentions spring from a variety of causes, not all of them honourable; and that, if they are to be effective, tools of some sort are essential. Not least, they also disclose that the effort to work for a good end is likely to be hard and disillusioning in the face of man's own nature and environment, while Doris Lessing ameliorates that view much less than her nineteenth century counterpart.

Dorothea's directionless idealism, so frequently undercut by her ignorance of self and the practicalities of life is mirrored, as I have suggested, by Martha's vague desire for a good end, an escape for her too from the "petty mazes" of restrictions and trivialities which surround her. Neither, as both authors state, is effectively educated; Dorothea by reason of her historical situation, Martha because of a certain independence which debars her from submission to the current educational system. Both are, to differing degrees, in conflict with their families and the traditional assumptions which family and society make about them and their futures. Dorothea, imprisoned in a more restrictive age and the limitations of her illusions, succumbs rapidly and lucklessly to her hair-shirt marriage, which she selects as her field for endeavour. Martha, on

the other hand, is a more positive rebel, who selects her battlefield so as to force issues. She attempts to shock those around her by her reading of sexual manuals, her willing approach to the physical, her scorn of her mother's prudishness. Her glorious flight to the city leads initially to the equally limited emancipation of the typewriter, however; until she too is impelled by the forces of war and a society which has no more place for her than Dorothea into a loveless and absurd marriage. For both characters sex is an issue of magnitude, though George Eliot's historical situation forces her to handle this aspect indirectly and, ~~often~~ <sup>often</sup> it must be confessed, <sup>^</sup> with more subtlety than Mrs. Lessing.

Martha's initial battle is, as I have implied, for identity and freedom - the freedom to be herself and to discover what that self is, which is, for her author, a moral struggle. This battle for identity incorporates her inner struggle between her feeling approach to life, and her reason; throughout Martha Quest she endeavours to reach an equilibrium between the two aspects of her nature; and, indeed, it is a struggle which continues spasmodically for her throughout the sequence. In her efforts to escape the constraints of conformity and convention, and to mature on her own terms, she mirrors, as her author notes, the perennial contest of the young with their elders. In



Martha's case, however, the contest is exacerbated by her isolated and restrictive life on the farm, and by her uneasy relationship with her mother. Mrs. Lessing's apprehension of pattern and process in human affairs, and her intelligent and honest perception of how little we develop, causes her to make Mrs. Quest, the domineering and old-fashioned mother, an erstwhile rebel, who escaped from her family to nurse in World War I. Paradoxically, her own rebellion lends her no insight into Martha's efforts to escape the cage of custom; for Doris Lessing knows that reason and experience are frequently powerless in the face of darker forces, such as our biological rôles. She hints suggestively that the exceedingly aggressive nature of the conflict stems from growing sexual rivalry between mother and blossoming daughter; and that insight is tellingly corroborated by Mrs. Quest's horror of the physical and subsequent attempts to ignore or submerge it, while Martha possesses her body with love and openness.

The brutality of Martha's struggle with her mother is underlined by her subconscious fear that she may, in fact, be like her, that a deterministic universe may render her as querulous and unsatisfied as Mrs. Quest. Sydney Kaplan properly observes that Martha cannot accept "that part of herself which is her mother", noting Martha's obsession with genetics and self-identity even during sexual intercourse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Janet Kaplan, Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel, 1975, p. 151

Her need and desire to proclaim herself as unique is mirrored by the efforts of Barbara Vaughan in The Mandelbaum Gate and Dora in The Bell. All three authors see the strained contemporary female psyche as close, often, to breaking point, and insist on its right to be accepted for what it is. Their insight into the pain of that split, and the difficult but essential need to achieve a self-image with which to face the world, is intelligent and sensitive. They also reveal their excellent psychological realism in their delineation of their characters' occasional relapses into passivity, so that rebellion and acquiescence follow a see-saw pattern: Barbara Vaughan allows Freddy to disguise and kidnap her; Dora flees to London to let events take their course; Martha collapses into marriage.

Doris Lessing's meticulous charting of Mrs. Quest's own background and pressures, however, help to explain her thwarted and thwarting nature, and to arouse sympathy for an otherwise unprepossessing character. The revelation of her origins and sufferings prevent her from being seen as an ogre; and she becomes for the reader, and eventually for her daughter, one more human fly trapped in a web not of her own making. Her relationship with her own mother was truncated by death; and she escaped her solidly middle class background to nurse in World War I and to marry Mr. Quest, whose social background was inferior to her own. Within the radical context of Africa and life on a remote

farm, she still absurdly maintains the mores and values of her English past, which effectively separates her from her neighbours and prevents her from seeing things as they are. Make up is "fast", Martha must be clothed as a little girl even as her breasts burgeon; for "Her mother said that girls in England did not come out until at the earliest 16, but better still 18, and girls of a nice family wore dresses of this type until coming out."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Quest did not herself come out; but she reflects that if she had married better, if the farm had been more successful, it would have been possible for Martha to do so.<sup>2</sup> Dissatisfaction with her own lot and an illusory grasp of what is important, lead her to fasten on Martha and her future life and career as a focus for her own interest and aspirations. Martha will achieve what has eluded her; Mrs. Quest will live through her daughter. This desire for possession complicates the ritual battle between mother and daughter; and while its manifestations may occasionally appear trivial (they battle over issues like a low-cut dance dress) the reader experiences a real sense that it is a significant fight, which Martha must win if she is to be a properly adult person.

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1 Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, 1973, p. 23

2 *ibid*, p. 23



Frequently, she turns for relief and support to her father, which is again, of course, psychologically realistic. Their communion is described as wordless and deep; but as she matures, she begins to sense Mr. Quest's strange dream-locked apathy, which warningly echoes the presentation of Dick Turner in The Grass is Singing. He sits on the verandah gazing to the hills; and as both women flee to him with tales of the other, responds with increasing irritation and pleas that they should stop fighting. He has "the look of a person half claimed by sleep"<sup>1</sup>; and while Martha is suspicious of her mother's part in the ritual of rest (she continually urges that her husband must be "tired" and should sleep) she later realizes that the fate of this vigorous woman in marrying a man destroyed by the war has been itself a grim one.

After her refusal to matriculate, Martha returns to the farm; but her beloved home ceases to satisfy her, for it has become "like a spell which had lost its force".<sup>2</sup> She turns outward to society, sensing the restriction of her physical and genetic isolation; and her friendships are partially dependent on their power as levers in the battle with her mother. Thus her equivocal friendship with the physically ripe Boer girl, Marnie, blossoms in proportion to

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1    ibid, p. 31

2    ibid, p. 31

her sense of her mother's English distaste; while her genuine feeling for the Cohens is enhanced by the fact that they are Jews.

These friendships have a further significance in that they represent the two sides of Martha's personality, that is her feeling and her reason. At this stage of her development, these elements are discordant; the novel portrays her experiments with sex, her physical nature, and her reading of Engels and discussions with the Cohens as two unreconciled aspects of her life, between which she swings with little sense of equilibrium. Indeed, throughout this long sequence I have argued that she battles to unify her nature, which can be compared to the way in which her author sees the physical and the "willed" approaches to life in The Grass is Singing as separate and sterilely locked off from each other, and laments their divorce.

Martha's characteristic stance to life is, I think, intuitive and emotional, and is dependent on her apprehension of the physical; for though she hungers for new ideas and continually reaches out to people like the Cohens to be told what to read, this intellectual search, while important, appears ultimately to be nourished by a more superficial level of her being. Her grasp of ideas, her attempts to reasoned approaches to the problems of her society encourage her, at a later stage, to engage in politics, to which she is also impelled by her impassioned idealism. Gradually,



however, over a long period of effort and disillusionment, she sees pragmatic courses as helpless in the face of man's nature and the huge problems which face him. Her rejection of political, man-directed action drives her back into an appreciation of her physical approach to life which has been, as it were, forced underground. It is this openness to the actuality of existence which leads to her strange experiences in The Four-Gated City, where she seems, with Lynda, to "plug" into some kind of larger force. I shall look later at this fascinating experience, linking it with Sufi ideas<sup>1</sup>; but it is important to stress its early and, almost commonplace, beginnings; for Mrs. Lessing maintains her powerful grasp of actuality even when she touches prophecy.

I have previously commented on Martha's openness to the body, contrasting this with her mother's attempt to deny the physical and, in particular, her daughter's sexual development. She has a real and touching sense of her own beauty, which is later movingly echoed by her reflections when pregnant, when she acknowledges her body will never be so whole and perfect again.

"She sat under her tree, hugging her sun-warmed arms, feeling the firm soft flesh with approval, and the sight of her long and shapely legs made her remember the swollen bodies of the pregnant women she had seen, with shuddering anger, as at the sight of a cage designed for herself."<sup>2</sup>

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1 see pp. 486 - 487

2 Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 66



Similarly, Martha's appreciation of her physical surroundings is immediate and poetic. It is, as I have suggested, a constant of her being, which results, even at this early stage, in an experience which I should like to term visionary. It is both strange and prophetic of her later development; but as a young woman, she denies its potential, gloomily concluding that it is "just" sex.

"There was certainly a definite point at which the thing began. It was not; then it was suddenly inescapable, and nothing could have frightened it away. There was a slow integration, during which she and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sunwarmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery mealies, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms. She felt the rivers under the ground forcing themselves painfully along her veins, swelling them out in an unbearable pressure ..... In her ears was an inchoate grinding, the great wheels of movement, and it was inhuman ..... no part of that sound was Martha's voice. Yet she was part of it, reluctantly allowed to participate, though on terms ..... "<sup>1</sup>

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1    *ibid*, pp. 61 - 62

Self, the individual, is forgotten in a mystic communion with nature, which Martha experiences, not without pain, through the medium of her own body. She realizes that "her own idea of herself and her place in the chaos of matter"<sup>1</sup> is futile; and what is required of her is something quite different; "it was as if something new was demanding conception with her flesh as host".<sup>2</sup> The force desists, however, leaving her with emotions of chagrin and irritation. Her experience here relates clearly with Charles Watkins' insights in Briefing for a Descent into Hell and the narrator's vision of the world "behind the wall" in The Memoirs of a Survivor. I should also like to link it with Iris Murdoch's account of Effingham's vision in The Unicorn<sup>3</sup>. For Effingham, forgetfulness of self in the face of death entails a clarity of vision which enables him to see the universe properly for the first time, which causes a subsequent and automatic opening out to love. He is thus, for Iris Murdoch, in touch with the highest truth of existence. Martha here becomes one with the universe, and is aware of her puniness and need to develop in a way she does not yet comprehend. An earlier age would, I think, have seen both these visions in religious terms; and the efforts of both authors are also comparable; for they seem to me to be engaged in the important task of the secularization and freeing for contemporary purposes of religious myth and experience.

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1    ibid, p. 62

2    ibid, p. 62

3    see p. 377

experience.

Martha reduces her visions, as I have commented, by attributing them to "just sex". Her author, more far-sightedly, links them with the sexual, but still sees them as significant. Like D. H. Lawrence, she is aware of the non-rational communion which can exist at times of sexual strain and uplift. It is not surprising therefore, that this aspect of Martha Quest disappears when her own individual sexual activity becomes intense. Absorbed in sex and then parenthood, she becomes an entirely earth-bound and pragmatic individual. For the young Martha, however, her vision is a difficult reminder that the world does not end at her fingertips, and that reason alone cannot cope with the whole of existence.

Martha is also subject to another kind of vision, which springs from her vague but impassioned idealism and which I have compared with the yearnings for good ends of Marina in A Home for the Highland Cattle and Dorothea's aspirations in Middlemarch. Doris Lessing's treatment of this is, I think, interesting; for while she is critical of its shapelessness, and uncovers the fact that it frequently springs from self-fantasy, she does not totally <sup>negate</sup> ~~regale~~ its value; for it is partially responsible for Martha's political engagement and thus helps to bear some useful fruit. It points to a way forward, though, which is not finally productive.



Her first experience of this, as it were, secondary vision occurs, significantly, at a time of particular strain for Martha. She cannot see how she is to develop, since all the feminine stereotypes she knows are unpalatable to her. Her sense of isolation is strong. She watches an African and a boy ploughing; and the cruelty of the former encourages her ready sympathy. Then,

"She looked away over the ploughed land, across the veld to the Dumfries Hills, and refashioned that unused country to the scale of her imagination. There arose, glimmering whitely over the harsh scrub and the stunted trees, a noble city, set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces. There were splashing fountains, and the sound of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together ....."<sup>1</sup>

The abstract, if well-intentioned, nature of her vision is apparent; harmony both aesthetic and inter racial is to be secured at a stroke; the cruel and difficult are to be forgotten. Doris Lessing does not comment overtly on this wish fulfilment as George Eliot, for example, might

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 17

have done; but the vision's juxtaposition to <sup>Martha's</sup> adolescent problems provides an excellent implicit commentary, while her later development of the dream city, outside one of whose gates stand "most of the people of the district, forever excluded from the golden city because of their pettiness of vision and small understanding"<sup>1</sup> amusingly suggests its limits. Later in the novel, Martha glides off into a further repetition of her dream when she has been desiring a warm kinship with those who would "understand" her;<sup>2</sup> and the scene clearly points up the escapist nature of her fantasy, exposing its foundations as flimsy and self-gratifying; so that one is reminded of Iris Murdoch's suspicion of the fantasizing process.<sup>3</sup> In The Four-Gated City, as the title suggests, Martha's notion, her old dream, now largely abandoned by her in her maturity, is taken up by Mark as the basis for his own novel; and the futuristic appendix to Doris Lessing's work is a commentary, both ironical and sober, on such visions, which are reduced in the year 2000 to a fight for human survival.

I should like to turn now to consider in a little more detail the place which reason occupies in Martha Quest's character. It has been suggested that an intuitive approach

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1    ibid, p. 17

2    ibid, p. 134

3    see the portrait of Michael Meade in The Bell, for example, pp. 278 - 284

to life is characteristic of her, and that reason and feeling battle within her in a way reminiscent of many adolescents. In her attempts to understand herself and her environment, she reaches out to works like Havelock Ellis, Marx and Engels; but just as her idealistic vision of the future was partially dependent on her self-need, so in this process she desires less to fully understand than to secure a rapid means of curing her own and society's ills. Martha is by no means a scholar; she grabs hungrily at books as she later grabs hungrily at experience in the city. Her author conveys a real sense of this frenzy, where experience is to be "got through" so as to arrive at somewhere else, which is presumably preferable to the present. Alarmingly, Martha even sees her marriage in this light.<sup>1</sup>

In a very human and amusing fashion, she takes from her reading what she wants; sometimes this is a confirmation of her own intuitions and sufferings; or sometimes a defence against life. She thoroughly agrees with Engels' Origin of the Family, "or rather, with what she gained from it, which was a confirmation of her belief that the marriages of the district were ridiculous and even sordid, and most of all old-fashioned."<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing's individual "conscience"

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1 Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 268

2 *ibid*, p. 66



is clearly eclectic in its operations; but Martha's very real sense of her own vulnerability later sends her to reason to afford some protection for the "soft, shell-less creature"<sup>1</sup> she feels herself to be. In this process of protection, she again discards what will not "fit".

"She was engaged in examining and repairing those intellectual's bastions of defence behind which she sheltered that building whose shape had first been sketched so far back in her childhood she could no longer remember how it then looked ..... Reaching out in all directions from behind it, she clutched at the bricks of arguments, the stones of words, discarding any that might not fit into the building."<sup>2</sup>

But Martha's intermittant dependence on reason is not totally defensive and self-absorbed. For she is able to harness her reading of Marx, or her historical sense, to help her to understand and thus extenuate her own mother's conduct and nature. She reflects that Mrs. Quest was inexorably shaped by her own diseased society,<sup>3</sup> that she was, as Martha herself may be, a mere pawn "in the hands of an old fatality".<sup>4</sup> Charitably, she considers her mother's position

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1 Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage, 1973, p. 109

2 *ibid*, p. 109

3 *ibid*, p. 108

4 *ibid*, p. 109

beside "a series of shadowy dependent men, broken-willed and sick with compelled diseases".<sup>1</sup> She cannot compel love by these thoughts; but she does generate understanding, and demonstrates the proper exercise of her conscience, where she does not merely judge shallowly, or adopt unthinkingly society's viewpoints, but moves, with difficulty, to a proper evaluation, which is itself dependent on both her reading and her personal experience. She tests the individual against the collective view or assumption.

With Martha's flight to the city, the physical aspects of her personality, in respect of her sexual experiences, are perhaps uppermost; but her desire to be more than she is and to work for a good end is still vital to her character. These facets are portrayed as warring; and she herself, with increasing self-knowledge, looks askance at her dual nature, and frequently employs her reason to criticize her sentiment.

"This poem she read through several times; and she watched herself sliding into that gulf of rich and pleasurable melancholy where she was so dangerously at home, while that sarcastic and self-destructive voice inside her remarked, Well, well, and did you see that?"<sup>2</sup>

Her inner split is mirrored by the dichotomy between her frenzied social life, and the world of work, or political

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1    *ibid*, p. 109

2    Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 185

commitment, which corresponds to her earlier contrasting friendships with the physical Marnie and the intellectual Cohens. The society in which she finds herself is thus one of extremes; and the poison and frenzy which the incipient war engenders exacerbates its unbalanced nature. At first, however, it is for Martha a place of freedom and excitement; she is released into the irresponsible life so well described in The Grass is Singing; for she is the young unattached white woman almost perpetually engaged in a round of pleasure. She is, as her author notes, the unlikely and emancipated heir of the privileged nineteenth century female. Work means little to her; her intermittent resolve to do better is eroded by the incessant demands of parties, picnics, boyfriends.

That society's own grasp of the reality and importance of work is comparably spasmodic; for "in this town due honour was paid to holidays. Every year, from the beginning of December, work in the offices began perceptively<sup>ibly</sup> to slacken."<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the social world of the Sports Club, the dances, the sundowner parties, encapsulates the young's grasp of actuality; for they are a privileged group, who are sentimentally urged by their elders to have a good time "while you're young".<sup>2</sup> Martha's generation is ominously characterized by such unthinking and dangerous slogans; and their pursuits, while mostly harmless, often escalate into violence.<sup>3</sup>

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1    *ibid*, p. 186

2    *ibid*, p. 185

3    see p. 186, for example



The older generation looks on at their licensed idiocy with benign acceptance, occasionally irritated that it costs money to mend its depredations, but fundamentally endorsing the irresponsibility. The odd sombre note is struck by scenes like the running over of a black man by the drunken Binkie Maynard: his father gloomily looks on in disgust. Yet, joy of joys, the "old boy" isn't hurt, and walks away, his body and Binkie's status surprisingly intact.<sup>1</sup> It is a Waugh-like picture, which reveals the frenetic abandon of a society about to be plunged into war, where one gyrates very fast indeed to offset the dangerous motion of an unstable planet.

Martha cannot escape the social round; for some part of her responds to its dreary and mechanical gaiety; but she is disgusted and enervated by the banality of her pursuits. She reflects longingly on the certitude of the Cohens and their unwavering acceptance of work and education, while inescapably <sup>herself</sup> drawn/to the frivolous.

"She was thinking that she had not been in town more than a few weeks and already she was bored and longing for something different; also she was consumed by such a passion of restlessness that the conflict made her feel weak and sick. She was thinking that at any moment during the last evening, had she been asked, she would have replied that she was bored; yet, as she looked back on it, her nerves responded with a twinge of excitement."<sup>2</sup>

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1    *ibid*, p. 270

2    Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 182

Nor are her sexual experiences more satisfying. If to the Cohens she is a mind, to her various lovers, she is a body; and her sufferings (for the word appears justified) at their hands destroy her equivocal fusion of mind and body and symbolize for the reader modern man's alienation from wholeness and fruition. Douglas initially treats Martha's body as an object of adoration, a sacred vessel to be revered. During the "rite", she is passive; she accepts the "adoration", but waits all the time

"for him to sate his visual passion and allow her to forget the weight of her limbs, her body, felt as something heavy and white and cold, separate from herself."<sup>1</sup>

Her sense of disassociation and dissatisfaction is marked; and while the sanctification of the body brings no delight (for it is seen as an object apart from her and does not unify man and woman), the mechanical standpoint of a later lover is no improvement. To love he brings a brisk efficiency and thoroughness which Doris Lessing regards with irony, if not satire, while Douglas, when married, later completes the process of objectification with his sexual manuals and "experiments".

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1    *ibid*, p. 242

Mrs. Lessing makes no overt comment on the white society I have been describing: she does not need to; it stands self-condemned. Martha's fundamental and characteristic criticisms of its immaturity and lack of integrity complete the reader's sense of its frightening limitations, while her vision of a file of African prisoners underlines its oppressive and slave-supported base.

" ..... twenty black men and women in various clothing, barefooted and shabby .... The prisoners were handcuffed together, and it was these hands that caught Martha's attention: the working hands, clasped together by broad and gleaming steel, held carefully at waist level, steady against the natural movement of swinging arms - the tender dark flesh cautious against the bite of the metal ..... She marched, in imagination, down the street, one of the file, feeling the oppression of a police state as if it were heaving<sup>y</sup> on her."<sup>1</sup>

Martha's anger at the sight spurs her latent idealism; but she knows that to join the Prisoners' Aid Society is not the answer. Indeed, her encounters with the "intellectuals" of the city have been as unsatisfying as her social round and her physical experimentation. She notes the unity of

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 184



dress the women assume, which disdains "fashion"; but which clearly conforms to some other stereotype. She also notes the "resentment" which is patent "in every tone of their voices, every movement of their bodies".<sup>1</sup> While these women shrilly insist on the "rights of the intellect"<sup>2</sup>, they are clearly no more fulfilled than the domestic slaves of her childhood. Worse, they are, in some way she cannot define, less likeable. She determines she will not be like them; but then collapses in despair; for how is the new Jerusalem to be built? This reaction is both characteristic of Martha who is, as I have indicated, full of inner contradiction, and of her involvement with politics. She is often sceptical of those with whom her political commitment brings her into contact, but sees that there appears to be no other way to work for her good end. Before I look at her political engagement, however, it is necessary to consider her marriage, which is cogently seen as the partial product of the imminent war in Europe. This war profoundly affects life in the colony as it helps to enmesh Martha in a non-viable relationship.

I have made previous reference to the fact that white society in the colony is a superficial excrescence, where

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1    *ibid*, p. 131

2    *ibid*, p. 130

clubs and cabals maintain the morals of what is a beleaguered group. Its grafted-on nature is matched by the superficiality of its values, which seldom extend beyond the immediate, or the protection of the group. Doris Lessing exposes it, like Forster, as a curiously immature society, hostile to reflection and individuality, and preserving a rigid demarcation between the responsibility of its work and the mindlessness of its leisure. Its young are ritually kept ignorant and irresponsible, a process of which she is critical; for she sees it as a new and unpleasant phenomenon in Western society. The hysteria engendered by war, however, increases the colony's perpetual movement and, by inference, its removal from the realities of life; and she explicitly describes Martha's peer group's frenzy as parallel to that which has erupted throughout Europe. It is also linked, in Martha's own reflections, with the madness of World War I. She fears that her generation is to be warped like her parents'.

"It seemed as if the day was only a drab preliminary to the night, as if the pageant of sunset was meant only as a curtain-raiser to that moment when the lights sprung up along the streets, and with them a feeling of vitality and excitement ..... By midnight they were dancing as if they formed one soul; they danced and sang, mindless, in a half-light, they were swallowed up in the sharp, exquisite knowledge of

loss and impending change that came over the seas and continents from Europe ....."<sup>1</sup>

The poison of war encourages sentimentality, evasiveness, hysteria and the glorification of the base and vile. All, even intelligent characters like Mr. Maynard and Martha herself are at times caught up in it.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Lessing charts meticulously the meetings, the preparations, the entrainments; and her documentary manner, her, at times, clinical tone, frequently lends the human performers the appearance of rats in a maze, over-crowded rats, moreover, who have descended to savaging each other.

Martha's marriage is a partial consequence of the hysteria which the war engenders, and the result of one of her occasional and characteristic lapses into passivity. She does not herself fully understand the reasons and forces which lie behind it; but ominously regards marriage as something to be "got through".<sup>3</sup> The reader sees that she is, in a very complex way, impelled by biological, conventional and social forces; and pities the individual in her helplessness against the collective. Predictably, her union is a saddening echo of the larger society which helps

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1 Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage, p. 78

2 Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 271

3 see p.458



to shape it. It is characterized by an endless gregariousness; and the fairground wheel which Martha Quest glimpses from her bedroom becomes a symbol to her of her life and that of her peers, who circle endlessly and fruitlessly in the pretence of a glittering and fulfilled existence. The public nature of her marriage, however, ensures one doubtful benefit; for it means that it lasts a little longer than is to be expected, since she and Douglas are so seldom alone that their joint inadequacies are granted a little more grace.

Motherhood exposes Martha even more perilously to the pressures of the group, since her creator knows that reproduction and its paraphernalia are surrounded by some of society's most dearly-held taboos. It also delivers her into the hands of her old terror of heredity. Her pregnancy is neither planned nor desired; yet just as she has perhaps "fallen" pregnant through unconscious impulses and then proceeds to attempt an abortion, throughout the cycle of pregnancy and birth she is simultaneously pulled and repelled; for at one moment she gives herself up to the dictates of her body and then later viciously rejects it. The sight of a pregnant friend, Alice, appals and attracts her; exposure to the thought of surrendering her newly discovered and achieved physical self is terrifying; but, simultaneously,

"a deeper emotion was turning towards Alice, with an unconscious curiosity, warm, tender, protective.

It was an emotion not far from envy .....<sup>1</sup>

Martha creates in her own mind an opposition between pregnancy and freedom; yet it is not the simple polarity of an individual caught in the extraordinary process of giving birth to another individual, but is rather an exacerbated fear of becoming a mere pawn "in the hands of an old fatality".<sup>2</sup> She fears submission to her mother's fate, the loss of her precariously achieved individuality, past influences which she will perpetuate through the child. The individual, once more, attempts to resist the collective.

Initially, she also attempts to resist the forces of nature; the lack of control over her own, briefly perfect, body is resented. Her skin breaks into "purple weals", her thighs mark; but after a time, she accepts the demise of her "brief flowering". She is a creature divided against herself, a body dragged back "into the impersonal blind urges of creation", her mind "a lighthouse, anxious and watchful that she, the free spirit, should not be implicated ....."<sup>3</sup>

The ritual of birth, feeding, and the upbringing of Caroline, her daughter, erode Martha's sense of individual-

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1 Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage, p. 105

2 *ibid*, p. 109

3 *ibid*, pp. 144 - 145

ity and idealism still further; yet she is portrayed as maintaining her still small voice which tells her that she must be a "proper person"; her inner critic of her self and her life is still active. Her reading is desultory, her admiration for the Cohens in their wisdom, adolescent. Her author wryly comments that she really wants some dominant male to tell her what to do. Amusingly, she becomes enmeshed with a group of young wives in the suburbs; and watches the formal similarities of their lives while simultaneously aware of the pressure they exert upon her to conform.<sup>1</sup> As she resented and disliked the group identity of the socialist intellectuals, so she reacts critically against this group's enactment of the delights of domestic bliss: yet she is also, against her will, pulled towards it, not because she admires its ethos or values, but because it enshrines the reproductive impulse, which is so powerful and far-reaching. Motherhood and marriage in fact exacerbate Martha's dual nature and her confusion; but her ever-lively conscience and sense of a greater potential in life eventually enable her to break out from the cycle of repetition.

It is a process which Doris Lessing describes as gradual and difficult. From Mr. Quest's "What did you do it for?" Martha has to progress towards a clarification of her view of her husband and marriage and, once the scales have fallen, a hardening of resolve which will enable her to break free. In her muddle and thoughtlessness, she

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1 *ibid*, p. 276 et passim.



initially refuses to accept that Douglas is, in her father's phrase, "a commercial traveller" and not even "a man"; but her creator's previous documentation of the sexual side of her marriage, and Douglas' attitude that sex is merely an extension of other oral and physical pleasures such as food and drink, corroborates Mr..Quest's opinion.

Martha oscillates between resentment at her impossible situation, a wild desire to resolve it by being carelessly pregnant for the second time, and that hard inner clarity, that internal critic which tells her she is herself, an individual, who cannot accept the feeble solutions of others. She will not conspire with her fellow men to ignore the truth, that she would then close as a "middle-aged woman who had done nothing but produce two or three commonplace and tedious citizens in a world that was already too full of them."<sup>1</sup>

Martha's battle with her physical nature is a significant constituent in the drama; and it is constantly portrayed as a troublesome one. Doris Lessing uncovers her peculiarly twentieth-century dilemma - the simultaneous acceptance of sex as a shared and pleasurable partnership, and the atavistic need to be mindlessly submerged in child-bearing and motherhood; to be the submissive mate. This struggle, and the need for an intelligent but feeling acceptance of man's physical nature is seen as a moral

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<sup>1</sup> ibid, p. 303

battle; a fight once more for wholeness, fruition, an opening out to love and pleasure of a balanced kind.

Douglas' reaction to her desire for independence is also complicated. He swings insanely from brutality to pleading, from sentiment to a cunning attempt to entrap her sexually. His feeble query "We're alright, aren't we?" echoes, as Martha gratingly notes, the catch phrases of the club. On his return from the services, she sees him for what he is, "gross and commonplace"; "he would always, all his life, be one of the boys. At 60 he would still be a schoolboy."<sup>1</sup> He is a half man, a creature of slogans and cant; and his hysterical and pulpy instability indicate the unpleasant nature of the society which bred him. His behaviour in asserting power rights over the dependent female is viewed as the product of some very unsavoury indoctrination. On one occasion, he threatens Martha with a revolver; he assaults her.<sup>2</sup> When it is apparent she is determined to leave, however, he sentimentally urges that she should "say goodbye to Caroline".<sup>3</sup> This lack of balance is unconsidered and frightening to reader and Martha alike; it indicates the individual mindlessly submerged in the constraints of custom and conformity. Douglas is, in fact, an effective

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1 Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage, p. 264

2 *ibid*, p. 376

3 *ibid*, p. 379

representative of convention, that force which would cage Martha in a narrowing and inappropriate rôle; and he mouths the catch phrases of society, "a good mother", and "responsibility for marriage" in a conditioned attempt to reinforce the norm. Attitudes, as comparison with Middlemarch shows, have scarcely progressed much.

In her desperate need for integrity, Caroline is abandoned, since Martha sees this as "setting her free"; she will thus never be entrapped as Martha herself was in an invidious relationship with her mother, and will break out of the cycle of the conflict of the generations, which is a powerful subsidiary theme in this sequence. The author characteristically makes no moral comment on this act; in the fifth volume of the sequence, Martha herself knows she was wrong; but the source of value firmly rests in the individual and his conscience. Mr. Maynard critically suggests that since the French and Russian revolutions were Martha's parents she can effectively dispense with a family;<sup>1</sup> and the next two novels, A Ripple from the Storm and Landlocked examine the modern woman's attempts to engage politically; the collective acquires a political and ideological slant.

Doris Lessing comments in the preface to The Golden Notebook that to her Marxism was an attempt at "a world-mind, a world ethic". She links it with formal religion in its attempt to make sense of the whole of existence and

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 380



to offer a code relevant to all, adding,

"It went wrong, could not prevent itself from dividing and subdividing, like all the other religions, into smaller and smaller chapels, sects and creeds."<sup>1</sup>

These two novels disclose the failure and fragmentation of that effort in the particular theatre of an African colony, where a compounding factor in the breakdown is, of course, the black/white situation.

I have previously commented that Martha's secondary vision, as it were, draws her to political commitment;<sup>2</sup> and while she rejects the tea-party politics of socialist intellectuals, she does, in these two novels, work insanely hard to aid the success of her communist cell and thus achieve her noble ideals. At the end of Landlocked, however, little has been encompassed; and her reflections at the meeting of a new group of Marxists indicate her acceptance of such failure as well-nigh inevitable. Amusingly, she notes their resemblance to her own group, even down to facets of character. She watches the "vision-maker" who will set it all in motion; and realizes that "in

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1 Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook, p. 15

2 see p. 455

~~3 Doris Lessing, Landlocked, 1973, p. 283~~

what he forms will be the seeds of its destruction".<sup>1</sup> He will encourage others to overlook "the lies, the exaggerations, and the sheer damned lunacy",<sup>2</sup> until he either collapses from a nervous breakdown, or goes elsewhere "where, he believes, there will be uncorrupted and whole people who can't ruin his vision".<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the practical individuals he has sucked along in his train will, resentfully, attempt to clear up the mess he has left behind. They will lament the "atmosphere of intrigue, unpleasantness and unreality"<sup>4</sup> he has created; and will trail off into thoughts of "if only". Those wistful reflections will show, Martha muses, that they "never understood the first thing about what was going on."<sup>5</sup> They will be, in fact, very much in the position of her early adolescence, when she desired to create the new Jerusalem while both ignoring her own limitations, and attempting to exclude others whose lack of vision, or largeness of soul was so clearly inadequate.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Doris Lessing, Landlocked, 1973, p. 283

2 *ibid*, p. 283

3 *ibid*, p. 283.

4 *ibid*, p. 283

5 *ibid*, p. 284

6 see p. 457

Martha's experience and insight here runs parallel to that of Doris Lessing, who sees acutely that visions must spring from an acceptance of reality and limitation, and that they are dependent upon the qualities or drawbacks of their creators. They also have to circumvent man's innate divisiveness, which Martha, as a young girl, saw as a principle of life; "it was as if the principle of separateness was bred from the very soil, the sky, the driving sun."<sup>1</sup>

The efforts of Martha and her peers are shown to be doomed, partly because they cannot overcome their individual weaknesses and dissensions, and partly because their idealism collapses in the face of international unscrupulousness and division. Both of these are aspects of the "principle of separateness" just instanced; and the whole process illustrates the cyclical nature of human efforts, and the enormous difficulties and hostilities which idealism has to overcome in order to effect change. The group is frequently split by conflicting views and loyalties; and there is much antagonism between individual characters. Anton's cold paternalism and Thomas' impetuosity inevitably create clashes; Piet comments bitterly to Matty before leaving the group "'I've got to the point where the less I see of your old man [Anton] the better'."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Doris Lessing, Martha Quest, p. 56

2 Doris Lessing, A Ripple from the Storm, 1973, p. 277



There is the hiving off of one group from another; Anton will not attend a meeting called by Solly Cohen on the grounds that the latter is a "Trotskyist" traitor;<sup>1</sup> and both novels provide an immense amount of documentation for the constant argument and internal preoccupation of these groups. Individual weakness is increased by the cynical and aggressive search for power (Solly Cohen is a dubious character in this respect); and the reader is reminded of the Italian priests in The Mandelbaum Gate, who are convinced that heaven is all-Italian territory.

The group's dawning knowledge that schism and faction exist on an international scale, too; and that, worst of all, Russia is herself suspect, completes the collapse. Martha is unwilling to surrender her idealistic view of the Russian revolution; but her "instinct" tells her that the book she reads exposing it rings true.<sup>2</sup> Just as she faced the mores of the colony, or the values of her parents with her conscience, so here she faces the claims of ideology and finds them, sadly, wanting. Later, in The Four-Gated City, she rejects the "cage of dogma", of whatever sort, unequivocally.

Doris Lessing exposes, too, that the confusion and complexity engendered by the frame of Africa complicates political issues even further; for the older generation is

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1 Doris Lessing, Landlocked, p. 228

2 Doris Lessing, Landlocked, p. 226

largely hostile to socialism, and punitive laws truncate its effectiveness, while the delicate issue of colour is a complicating factor. Martha's group feel, in common with other socialists, that the blacks must be freed; for to maintain the existing power structure would be contrary to their ideals. Yet their efforts to involve the Africans in socialism are abortive. They are hampered by rules, passes, curfews; and they also find that the blacks, quite rightly, have their own aims and insist on proceeding independently. Martha is greeted, on one occasion, by the sarcastic comment that "'We are always so interested to meet our white sympathisers'"; and her well-meaning offers of books and training are politely negatived.<sup>1</sup> Coalition with the blacks is abortive, partially because of the mischievous intermediary, Solly Cohen, and partly because the black/white fissure runs too deep to be effectively circumvented. The chaos of conflicting desires and modes of approach which is the result of political engagement is tellingly satirized in some of Doris Lessing's descriptions of meetings and concerts, where all who are gathered in the name of brotherhood, frequently descend to mutual vituperation or even blows.

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p. 185

But this account could imply that Mrs. Lessing's stance is a cynical one; and that she views the end of political idealism as muddle and despair. This is not the case, as her studies of some political characters like Mrs. Van or old Johnny show; for there her respect for integrity, hard work and a simplicity of spirit which is close to saintliness emerge. Progress appears to be achieved by little concrete acts of individual affection and care; from the acts of characters like Johnny who live among the Africans on their reserve and play naturally and unselfconsciously with their children;<sup>1</sup> or from Mrs. Van's perpetual attempt to improve individual lots, though she is, as she admits, by no means perfect. Doris Lessing's knowledge of schism and the complexity of human motivation suggest to her, however, that practical politics are not, or only exceptionally, the way forward; and in The Four-Gated City, the final novel of the sequence, she explores other possibilities.

She has commented that The Golden Notebook was an attempt to give "the ideological 'feel' of our mid-century";<sup>2</sup> but such a comment could well be applied to this novel, with its exhaustive detailing of post-war Britain, and the changing climate of the fifties and sixties. It is also a last

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1 *ibid.*, p. 216

2 Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook, p. 11



critical examination of the relation of the individual with the collective; and Martha's initial evaluations of the class-ridden and divided society she encounters in England, maintain her author's note of social comment. She also surveys the subject of madness; and links this with Martha's early visions of a potential in life which she did not then comprehend. It is at these two aspects of the novel I shall look; for I feel they relate most relevantly to my overall topic; and I am aware that the massive nature of this work militates against a comprehensive commentary.

Martha's initial apprehension of England is superb, matched in its meticulous observation and low-key language only by In Pursuit of the English. Her fresh eyes provide a challenging perspective for English society; and her horror at its class-ridden slant, its dishonesty, its blatant inequalities, its acceptance of the rigid and moribund is cogent. Through Martha's eyes, Mrs. Lessing criticizes the lack of opportunity and fulfilment for the working class, their submerged status and the exploitative nature of those beyond them. The iniquitous black/white power structure is replaced for Martha by a comparably unjust one; English society, despite its heroism, its warmth, its adult nature, is almost as corrupt as that of the African colony she has left.

Her disgust is epitomized by her uncivil experience in an expensive restaurant, where she is churlishly treated

because, as she correctly observes, she is not wearing the right "uniform". This trivial event is amusingly mined for its observation of manners, and for the moral implications which arise from these. Martha, and her author, object to the uniform qua uniform; for they both detest the constraints of convention; but equally they are angered at its negation of any "sort of charm or flair", its muting of beauty and form to an accepted, dingily tinged staidness.<sup>1</sup>

Martha and her escort eat "conformably"; the décor and the food are second-rate, though the prices are not. Her request for dry sherry is answered by sweet sherry, for that is a lady's drink. Her feeling of claustrophobia grows. The attempt Martha makes over the meal to get Henry to see the iniquity of the class gap, rooted as it is in her recent particular and intimate experience of the English working class, is answered by bumbling abstract talk of Liberals and socialist governments. He is unable to accept the primacy of individual experience, for his refuge is the category; and the irony emerges that Martha, the stranger, knows more of the English than he does. The analogy between one submerged class and another, the blacks, is clear. Doris Lessing reveals that England is encased in attitudes and notions as cramping, stultifying and deforming as the ugly little black dress and pearls Martha should wear.

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1 Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, 1973, p. 34

Society, as with Rose of The Other Woman is an agent of destruction; and the close of this novel gives a bleak glimpse of what its author sees as the results of such constriction.

For Martha, however, her initial time in England is also an interval of utter freedom, and the denial of all claims upon her. Though she realizes that such a state cannot last, she evades all responsibility, sufficient unto herself. In this situation, she is released into her old visionary trance. Here she experiences once more an enhanced clarity of the senses and a feeling of communion with the physical in the universe.<sup>1</sup> This experience, as I have commented is to be of significance later in the novel, and relates to Mrs. Lessing's hopes for the future. But Martha's instincts are, as the previous examination of her character will have shown, to commitment; she firmly believes as she later tells Paul that you have to work through what you have been given before you can be free. Thus she becomes a secretary to Mark and eventual mentor and mother to his family. Her sense of responsibility leads her to protect, exhort and encourage the confused menage which evolves in his house after his brother's flight to Russia. Martha, the fiercely emancipated, the opponent of the family, the idealist working for a Utopian state,

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<sup>1</sup> see, for example, p. 19



ironically becomes house mother to a tribe of bourgeoisie. In the face of the totalitarian and terrifying state which surrounds her, right personal feelings, care and concern for those around one, honesty and charity are the virtues that matter. Martha thus moves back from the "impersonal" commitment of politics to the field of personal relationships, which perhaps epitomizes her view that good ends can only be secured by an acceptance of the immediate.<sup>1</sup>

The society which surrounds the Bloomsbury house where she eventually takes up residence has already been described as deformed. It is also corrupt and dangerous. The siege which is laid to it after Mark's brother's defection to Russia is symbolic as well as actual; for the individual must now protect himself against the inimical collective. Political action is not only a problematical means of progress, it is also likely to be a deadly one; for now to be a Communist may entail the permanent loss of livelihood, or even, it is suggested, death. Even former friends and colleagues join the witch hunt; and the hysteria evoked by the search for communists is reminiscent of the colony's hysteria over war or the emancipation of the Africans. Honesty, loyalty and feeling are forgotten in the brutalizing terror. The novel goes on to portray a gradual and demoralizing slide into the primitive; and records the collapse of a civilization in a fictional version of "The Second Coming".

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<sup>1</sup> see Doris Lessing, Landlocked, pp. 282 - 284

Mark charts this process on the walls of his study; and trivial errors in domestic repairs, and the inefficiency of workmen are seen as indicative of the larger decay.

In the face of this overall slide, individuals are portrayed as increasingly threatened. Poisoned by pollution in air, sea and land, they are subject to lapses into frenzy; the psychologically maimed are everywhere, the "normal" struggle through life in a drug-ridden trance. Here it is that Mrs. Lessing fuses her description of Martha's visions with her examination of imbalance, and her survey of the efforts of psychology to cure the mentally sick. Psychology itself in fact becomes an iniquitous symbol for twentieth century brutality; for it personifies in its attitudes and practices the logical but limited mind's refusal to perceive that experience may be other than reason suggests.

At the close of Briefing for a Descent into Hell, (which expands the exploration of the strained psyche), Mrs. Lessing speaks of the tendency to label a feeling or a state of mind, and the way in which our educational processes encourage us to believe that to describe something is the same as "understanding and experiencing it".<sup>1</sup> She

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 251

quotes Blake's lines,

"How do you know but every Bird that cuts the airy way,  
Is an immense world of delight, closed by your senses  
five?"

Comparably, in The Four-Gated City, Martha sees the human tendency to label as arising from fear in the face of different, possibly unassimilable experience. Man's concern is "how to isolate .... how to remain unaffected"; and his constant intent "to sterilize, or to make harmless: to partition off, to compartmentalize."<sup>1</sup> Thus, in that novel, the experience of the "sick" Lynda and the visionary Martha is employed both to criticize the limitations of our habitual understanding of life and people, and to postulate that such sickness may be itself a valuable experience, and an access to a dimension of significance. This is a view close to that of R. D. Laing, as is often noted; and Doris Lessing herself links it with Sufi ideas of a "current" or force which comes from elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is that Martha discovers the inefficacy of psychology to cure her or to help Lynda; and she gradually finds that they are both telepathic, and can foresee the future and "tune in" to a wave length beyond the normal.

Lynda's experience is movingly rendered, for Mrs. Lessing portrays that increasing inhabitant of the twentieth century universe, the individual unable to cope with the

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 466

<sup>2</sup> see p. 401



world, or to live a "normal" life. She has been subjected to numerous, disparate and often contradictory attempts on the part of psychology to cure her. The tenor of the book suggests that a beautiful and alive person has been crippled and submerged. From time to time she emerges from the seclusion of her asylum and drugs; and she inhabits the basement of the Bloomsbury house in the semi-dark, its furnishings and layout themselves a ritual. She is unable to go out or to relate to her loved son and husband. To Mark's pathetic pleas for a proper married life, her response is flight and misery; and her wrecked beauty sadly conveys the destruction within. Martha's sight of her agony, her shocked awareness of her bleeding fingers under the white gloves gives an authentic sense of Lynda's misery, and of Martha's own indignation at the existence of such suffering.

"She moved around the space between the two walls visible and invisible, with her back to the room. She moved slowly, staring, directing the pressure of her gaze up and down and around the area of wall she faced; and she pressed her palms against it in a desperate urgent way, as if doing this would cause it to fall outwards and let her step out of the room over rubble and brick ..... Or she would turn her back to it, and face into the room; and keeping herself in a straight line from head to buttocks, bumped herself against it in short regular bursts of thud, thud, thud ....."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 501

Yet Lynda enjoys long periods of remission from her "madness", when she acts as an efficient and lovely hostess for her husband; and there is the suggestion that she "prepares" for her illness as for a positive state.<sup>1</sup> She knew as a child (a knowledge she has just managed to preserve in the face of her various "treatments"), that her way of looking was different from other people's; and her sufferings encourage Martha herself to see that madness may be a "door .... ready for her to walk in any time she wished."<sup>2</sup> She reflects that Lynda is attempting in her perpetual testing of the dimensions of her room to "get out"; and not merely from that cell itself, but from a restricting dimension.

"Lynda moved around and around because she had said to herself once, long ago perhaps, perhaps when she was a child? - Remember, don't let yourself go to sleep; and if you go on always, testing the walls for weakness, for a thin place, one day, you will simply step outside, free."<sup>3</sup>

Her experience relates, as I have observed, to Martha's visionary experience in Martha Quest; and is directly analogous to that of the narrator in The Memoirs

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1    *ibid*, p. 501

2    *ibid*, p. 508

3    *ibid*, p. 509

of a Survivor.<sup>1</sup> It can also be seen in relation to the Sufi ideas of the purgation of the soul, and the existence of different "states" or stages of being.<sup>2</sup>

Martha herself begins to be caught up by "a current that made her limbs want to jerk and dance"; and she is gropingly aware of "Great forces as impersonal as thunder or lightning or sunlight or the movement of the oceans being contracted and heaped and rolled in their beds by the moon", which sweep "through bodies",<sup>3</sup> and move individuals, like herself, as they will. Further subjection to this by no means pleasant experience, opens her out to a telepathic communication; "Martha could easily hear what Lynda was thinking".<sup>4</sup> Later, she plugs in as to a million radio sets which run simultaneously; and is aware of a jumble of sound, over which she maintains a precarious and painful control. Her terror at this traumatic experience leads to the knowledge that she is being "taken over". She panics, "Her head was a jar, a bedlam";<sup>5</sup> but eventually the "ocean of sound" is "a low retreating booming noise safely far away."<sup>6</sup>

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1 Doris Lessing, The Memoirs of a Survivor, 1976, p. 15

2 see p. 398

3 Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 510

4 *ibid*, p. 512

5 *ibid*, p. 514

6 *ibid*, p. 513<sup>5</sup>



It is not easy, however, for individuals in the novel to preserve the memory of these experiences, nor to assess their meaning and significance. Lynda herself later "forgets", or is frightened to admit to them.<sup>1</sup> She is currently being tormented by visions of an England covered with a poisonous "dew". Young Dr. Bentin helpfully suggests that she is projecting "her own loathing of herself ..... outwards on to her country."<sup>2</sup> The reader speculates that she is, in fact, foreseeing the England of the novel's appendix. An isolated Martha closes the novel with feelings of dismay at her heaviness and insensitivity. Just as she saw the "lighthouse" of her reason pointing the way forward in her trapped pregnancy,<sup>3</sup> so now she has "vision in front only, a myopic searchlight blind except for the tiny three-dimensional path open immediately before her eyes."<sup>4</sup> But her queries of where? how? who? meet only one reply, "Here, where else, you fool, you poor fool, where else has it been, ever .....?"<sup>5</sup> Tentatively, one concludes that, once more, she has to tread the path before her, visions apart. As she discovered as a young woman, life has to be lived here and now, and by means of the tools available to us.

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1    *ibid*, p. 582

2    *ibid*, p. 582

3    Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage, pp. 144 - 145

4    Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 607

5    Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 607

Martha's progress through this formidable sequence has been, as Florence Howe rightly suggests, from her sense of "biological necessity - an inhuman, violent, warlike necessity - toward participation in a human social revolution."<sup>1</sup> She has also forged her own scheme of values; for she depends on individually-made judgements, which have love and feeling, backed by intelligence, at their core.<sup>2</sup> Her character has kept alive for the reader Mrs. Lessing's sense of the need for the individual to "voluntarily" submit his will to the collective; and the continuous exercise of her intelligence, shows that each submission must be preceded by scrupulous personal and independent judgements. Her consciousness filters mystical union, social phenomena, personal relationships and ideological dogma. Her perpetual attempts to understand experience, like the C.N.D. marches, left-wing plays, her telepathic vision of Dorothy's suicide, her efforts to defend Lynda against the demands of her son, to love Mark in his need, reveal an individual strenuously and fully alive in the difficult experience of the modern age. Her continuous exercise of a contemporary and lively and most practical conscience ensure that she becomes a twentieth century and non-Puritanical Pilgrim. She makes no claim (nor does her author) to perfection; but she is valiant for truth.

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1 Florence Howe, "Doris Lessing's Free Women", Nation, January 11th, 1965, p. 34

2 see for example her conversation with Mrs. Van about Flora in Landlocked, p. 217

The close of The Four-Gated City is cataclysmic; for the futuristic accounts of the appendix describe, among other disasters, the destruction of England. These I want to leave to the following section, where I shall consider them alongside the discussion of Briefing for a Descent into Hell. It is important to repeat, however, that the collective at the close of this novel has become not the beautiful city of Martha's original vague vision, not the place of enlightenment which would enable the individual to live harmoniously and to reach his fullest, truest self, but camps for survival, swept by plague, and outposts of desperation. Yet even at this last shore, the mutants exist, who are children not deformed by education, with their inner eye not shut. Mrs. Lessing manages this token of faith in the future, even as she clear-sightedly sees the holocaust which man's divisive nature has wrought. Sufism encourages her on.



Apocalypse

The appendix to The Four-Gated City soberly reports the cataclysm which its author fears is imminent; her purpose there is the moral one of warning and informing in order to divert man from the abyss. She writes in the tradition of Jeremiah and Amos; and her revelation is stark and explicit. It is also, like theirs, dependent on a religious viewpoint. The documents which form her appendix reveal a world where the collective has become ultimately hostile to the personal. That balance between individual and society which she originally saw as the way forward is totally upset; and the individual's one resource is to withdraw into communes of sympathetic friends and relations, and to opt out of the larger community. But even this apparently innocent strategy is jeopardized by suspicion and hostility; for spies and inspectors come to observe, and hooligans to vandalize those who are different. The world of the police state, of checks, passes, punitive laws and seeping fear deforms England of the late twentieth century.

Francis Coldridge describes the last stages of the collapse and notes the ironical and alarming discrepancy between the surface of "this time of bland insular conformity" and the anarchy at its heart. He likens it to the sinking of a ship; while captain and officers stand to attention saluting the flag, the crew and passengers riot. She is later to con-

firm her sense of this gulf in The Memoirs of a Survivor, where those in authority are the tenacious survivors of a previous privileged age, while ordinary men and women forage and improvise like the members of some near-savage tribe. Francis sees a complete divorce between those in authority and individual members of society; there is no common aim, and no mutual understanding between them. Hence, once the shock waves of pollution and disaster strike, things fall rapidly apart. What he terms a kind of "emotional Luddite-ism" has already gripped people, so that they unconsciously will the destruction of a society which expects them to live in an intolerable way. It is "an inner immigration", a retreat from an outer world of excessive complication and stress; and that world is, moreover, rapidly reverting to barbarism. Part of the power of this disturbing portrait rests in its identifiable links with some aspects of current experience; the reader feels he is watching the ominously possible.

Martha's account of the primitive life of some survivors of the "Catastrophe" completes the picture, and indicates a potential way forward. Her community survive radioactivity and holocaust to live simply; yet Mrs. Lessing is not advocating the joys of rural life in the simple-minded way of some twentieth century "prophets" by means of this image. Rather she is pleading for a retreat from aggression, a reversion to man's better, fuller self. Certain children in the group are credited with extraordinary powers; they "hear and see"; and the island itself has a high fine air reminiscent of Prospero's isle.

"And the texture of our lives, eating, sleeping, being together, has a note in it that can't be quite caught, as if we were all of us a half-tone or a bridging chord in some symphony being played out of earshot with icebergs and forests and mountains for instruments. There is a transparency, a crystalline gleam."<sup>1</sup>

Martha suggests that her mystical "Guardians" are a token of the future; for they have evolved beyond the possibilities of contemporary man. They possess unique powers (akin to Martha's fumbling attempts at vision); and they are sensitive to the potential of the whole universe, not just their section of it. They have the interests of the whole human community at heart.<sup>2</sup> Progress will come, however (as Briefing for a Descent into Hell also reveals); haltingly, and as a result of the mystical, rather than the man-made and reasoned. Doris Lessing's perennial interest in moral dilemmas and a rational approach to life thus becomes much less urgent and important; and she turns to works which suggest, allude and evoke rather than state, and which themselves embody a religious approach to life.

I referred earlier to Idries Shah's comment that Sufi works often produce a "kaleidoscopic effect", and can profitably be seen in a number of ways.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 660

<sup>2</sup> cf. this aspect of Sufi belief on p.400

<sup>3</sup> see p. 402



Briefing for a Descent into Hell is comparably many-faceted; and its extraordinary combination of styles and modes gives rise to reflection on a variety of themes. These styles are often strangely and hauntingly juxtaposed to each other (for example the mundane hospital interrogations with Charles Watkins' account of his sea journey); but where one might expect such juxtaposition to unbalance or even destroy the work, the contrasting patterns of language appear instead to reflect upon each other in a fruitful and illuminating way. They are themselves often allusive; Charles Watkins' incessant repetition of "around and around and around" in the context of his "inner" voyage often reminds one of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner; the battles of the rat/dogs and monkeys recall the Swift of Gulliver's Travels and his descriptions of the Yahoos; and the central mythical "briefing" of the title evokes the current genre of space fiction. Not surprisingly, the themes to which they give rise are, as I have suggested, multiple. The most obvious of these is perhaps the examination of the schizoid experience. Mrs. Lessing is not concerned to make a case for a particular approach to this illness, however; but to look at it as fully and revealingly as she can. I find the theme of man's perverted evolution to his present state of murderous divisiveness particularly cogent; but it is only one aspect of a poetically rich book.

In her early story, Hunger, Doris Lessing conveyed the misery of the individual locked off from his fellows, condemned

always to isolation, and coming only late in the story to the joy and solace of community. In Briefing for a Descent into Hell, divisiveness is not sorrow, but death, "away from the sweet sanity of We";<sup>1</sup> and the ironically treated "briefing" of the novel's title has as its purpose the restoration of universal harmony;

"to keep alive in any way possible, the knowledge that humanity, with its fellow creatures, the animals and plants, make up a whole, are a unity, have a function in the whole system as an organ or organism."<sup>2</sup>

Man is portrayed in Mark's speech as unable to feel or understand in any way except through his own drives or functions. His main limitation is his "inability to see things except as facets and one at a time." The world is a "poisonous hell", peopled by the malevolent and murderous who tolerate only those who resemble themselves. The savage and demented behaviour of the rat/dogs in Charles Watkins' dream is, in fact, an apt representation of man's degenerate state.

By means of the space fiction briefing, however, Doris Lessing plays with the idea that there may be some regenerative forces at work in the universe. The modern versions of the

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1 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 103

2 *ibid*, p. 120

gods, such as Merk and Minna Erve perceive that man's current activities cannot be allowed to continue, for not only does his poisoning of his planet jeopardize his own future, but inter-galactic harmony is at risk. The task of the "guides" or messengers who will descend to earth is to help man in his intolerable predicament; they have to "wake up those of us who have forgotten what they went for; as well as to recruit suitable inhabitants of Earth - those, that is, who have kept a potential for evolving into rational beings".<sup>1</sup> Since these guides will inevitably be faced with man's potentially murderous hostility to their new "message", that message has been imprinted on their brains. They may, consequently, in the rigours of earth life, forget it, as previous guides have done.

At the end of the novel, just before his subjection to electric shock, Charles Watkins talks to Violet of his reasons for undergoing the treatment which other patients most fear and detest. He has a terrible sense of "urgency", which he insists was with him before he lost his memory. This "anxiety state" he sees as a reflection "from that other part of ourselves" which "knows things we don't know."<sup>2</sup> In his need to rediscover that message, or part of himself, he has agreed to undergo e.c.t. This, the revelation of his previous character and actions, and his visionary sequences when ill, bespeak him as a guide, and

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1    ibid, p. 123

2    ibid, p. 247



hence an equivalent to Martha Quest's mystical "Guardians".

Charles has by no means, however, been an easy or particularly sympathetic character. He is clearly a remarkable man; for he possesses the ability to profoundly influence those around him, as Rosemary Baines' letter indicates. But he is equally prone to disturb and disconcert; for he has the unnerving tendency to talk in "millennia", and claims, on occasion, that the classics ( which are his subject), as taught now, are "hogwash".<sup>1</sup> His respect for personal relations is scant; he informs Jeremy Thorne's wife when she is in agonies over a possible divorce that her marriage is not important anyway.<sup>2</sup> Yet this is not meant unkindly nor is it maliciously uttered. By most standards too, he treats his mistress, Constance, badly, with the result that she hates him; but again this seems to spring from no personal animus. Rather it stems from a perspective beyond the normal. Tantalizingly, Charles' human behaviour relates to one of the visions he experiences through the crystal sphere. His vision of the world with, as it were, its grid of light, reveals to him both that the whole gives individual motes their significance, and that the lives of only a few possess "light" and point the way forward.<sup>3</sup> A "strand" of people, "a light webby tension of them everywhere over the globe, were the channels where the finer air went into the earth and fed it and kept it alive."<sup>4</sup> This "delicate mesh", however, has nothing to do with humanity's ethics or codes; and his

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1    *ibid*, p. 190

2    *ibid*, p. 188

3    *ibid*, p. 96

4    *ibid*, p. 96

intuition here corroborates his earlier vision of the departing rat/dogs; for a few of them too "have a light", but "this did not seem to match with any quality of group or pack morality."<sup>1</sup> So that while Charles' human behaviour may not accord with the ethics of the pack, he still possesses an inner light. Doris Lessing here approaches the position of Graham Greene, who also sees, at times, a disjunction between the moral and the religious.

Charles is not, though, invulnerable. His letter of proposal to his wife is touching and tender; he may be too old for her; he loves deeply.<sup>2</sup> It is also significantly obscure; for in it, he appears to equate himself with Odysseus (a link which is confirmed by his inner "sea voyage"), and begs that she will not treat him as Circe did. The reader connects this with his account of his adventures in Yugoslavia which he writes out for Doctor Y. These are vivid, moving and possess the stamp of truth. They also (in the most cunningly artistic way) have the appearance of slightly heightened dream sequences. He writes of the death of his friend, Miles, in the initial parachute jump, of the bond between the group, of his love for Konstantina, and her tragic death. Yet he was not in Yugoslavia in the war and his friend Miles is still very much alive. Miles comments of his war that it was like being in a highly coloured dream<sup>3</sup>, which could be, as I have indicated, a perceptive comment on Charles' own account; and one speculates whether the

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1    *ibid*, p. 90

2    *ibid*, p. 183

3    *ibid*, p. 224



latter is a highly empathetic character, or whether he can "plug into" the thoughts and lives of others as did Lynda and Martha, in The Four-Gated City.

His visionary experiences when ill in hospital are both extraordinary and compulsive. I find that they are also very painful to read, as if Doris Lessing had touched a chord or echo with these descriptions. One could see them as a brilliant metaphor for the schizoid experience, or an attempt to capture that experience as it actually appeared to, or was reported by the subject.<sup>1</sup> His visions begin with his sea voyage, which is narrated in the style of a story of adventure, or the open air, but which is often also interspersed with snatches of sea shanties, tantalizing echoes of poetry, and punning plays on words. Charles and his fellow marines<sup>r</sup> search for something to release them from the inexorable dictates of the current in which they are caught. They have been set "like barometers for Fair"; and later know "them" (for whom they wait) "by the feeling in the air; a crystalline hush"<sup>2</sup> which significantly causes "strain" in the sailors.

The description of the crystal sphere which appears to them is very beautiful; and it anticipates some of Doris

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1 The account of Watkins' voyage, for example, relates closely to the account of the actual breakdown of the sailor, Jesse Watkins, in R. D. Laing's The Politics of Experience, 1967, chapter 7.

2 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 22



Lessing's later descriptions of the planets, and of earth with its grid of light. These poetic images kindle the imagination; the mind rests upon them with a sense of release and reward. For Charles Watkins, however, the vision of the sphere is something of an illusion; for he is sadly left behind when it "takes up" his shipmates. He mourns "as one small kitten that has been hidden by a fold of a blanket ..... mews out in loneliness ..... feeling for its lost companions among the rapidly chilling folds of the blanket."<sup>1</sup> His way is to be a much tougher and harder one, akin in its metaphorical journeys to the process of the purgation of the soul of which Sufis speak. Now he abandons his <sup>rv</sup>twisty craft for a raft, on which he bobs helplessly, sometimes watching the waters of the sea above him like a transparent wall through which fish peer.<sup>2</sup> Later he reaches the apparent security of a rock; but gradually realizes that its solidity imprisons rather than succours him. From here, he is rescued by the porpoise, whose helpful actions suggest a further theme of the novel, namely that man and the animals can be mutually interdependent, and that such a relationship is itself a rewarding experience.

The porpoise's loving help is echoed by the actions of the two "yellow beasts" who aid him in his climb to the precipice.<sup>3</sup> From an Eden-like forest, he ascends to a high windy plateau, which is itself fine and airy until polluted by

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1    ibid, p. 24

2    ibid, p. 30

3    ibid, p. 45

Charles' own involvement in the blood feast and the entry of the rat/dogs. Here he knows he must await the arrival of the crystal sphere; more, he must clean the central square in readiness. But his efforts are negated by the filth of the new arrivals, and, as he realizes, by the aggressive and fallen part of his own nature. He attempts to resist this by walking away from the nightly feast; and is indeed partially successful, for the sphere descends. The visions which he sees by means of it, and that sight he has of earth itself from the back of the great white bird, one can perhaps think of as his "briefing". They reveal to him the earth's degenerate state, and the few "lights" which illuminate its gloom, to which reference has been made. His visions then fade off into the playful "briefing" of the gods, which closes with Merk's warning to those about to descend that to awake from their protective sleep (which they will have entered in the face of earth's horror and barbarism) will be painful and traumatic.<sup>1</sup> It is shortly after this that Charles awakens with the urgent knowledge that he has something "to remember".<sup>2</sup>

His experience of the rat/dogs is also instructive; for while their battles may mimic the rigours of the evolutionary process,<sup>3</sup> and while his initial view of them is full

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1    ibid, p. 124

2    ibid, p. 132

3    Douglas Bolling, "Structure and Theme in Briefing for a Descent into Hell", Contemporary Literature, Spring, 1975, vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 550-565

of distaste, the significant factor is that he grows to experience some sort of affection for them. He sees that they have only recently begun to walk on their hind legs; for their progress is pathetic and jerky. Then, too, they fear the dark, and post lookouts for security, which gives them an added appearance of vulnerability. Charles recognizes (as Gulliver reluctantly did with the Yahoos) that they are, in some ways, like him; and this sense of fellow-feeling generates compassion. For their battles (initially with the monkeys, but later with each other), he has nothing but horror; but these too are not mere ordeals to him. His appalled vision of the dying female rat/dog, who gives birth even as she fights frenziedly for her life, leaves him in despair.<sup>1</sup> It is for Charles and reader alike, the ultimate horror; but the intervention of the white bird moves both on from this experience, which eventually itself effects a kind of cleansing by its fierce impact.

Charles' decision to undergo shock treatment in the hope that it will restore his lost vision to him has been referred to. Violet pleads with him to change his mind; but his sense that he has to help humanity get out of the "trap" overrules her fears.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the treatment normalizes him. His wife anticipates his return to the domestic hearth with joy; for he is now "like" everyone else. His letter

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1 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 85

2 *ibid*, p. 249



to Miss Baines, who has been "awakened" by him, is a polite shutting of the door between them. He is going back to Cambridge and work. On a first reading, I was most disappointed by this ending; but further reflection on the novel's meanings reminds one that Charles, and others, have had similar experiences before, and may yet "wake up" again.

Briefing for a Descent into Hell is a remarkable novel on which one could reflect much further. The suggestions it throws up are far beyond the few canvassed here. For example, by its playing with the idea of the modern "gods" in the space fiction section, and by its parallel<sup>1</sup>ing of Charles Watkins with Odysseus, it leads one to speculate whether ancient myths should be looked at merely as "myths". Could they contain references beyond the obvious ones? Comparably, Frederick Larsen's experience of the African tribe causes him to see the limitations of archaeology, which is his subject. He has "doubts" about it, which are amusingly but seriously aligned to the religious doubts of many figures in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Both these examples encourage the reader to wonder if our knowledge (to whose limits we pay lip-service only) is by any means extensive; and to speculate whether we do not cut ourselves off from too much when we employ traditional perspectives. Doris Lessing's suspicion of categories here finds cogent witness.<sup>2</sup>

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1    ibid, p. 160

2    see p. 484

Yet while this novel in form and meaning appears, and in many senses is, radical, it can also be seen in a traditional light. Its plea for harmony between man and nature echoes that of many of the great Romantics; and it plays with metaphors of music and sound in the space sections in a way which is (I think deliberately) reminiscent of the traditional notion of the music of the spheres. To read it is something like looking at a palimpsest; different layers and levels of meaning float upwards to the reader, until he feels that it is itself a shadowy version of the "briefings" it so memorably describes.

The Memoirs of a Survivor is a touching grace note to Doris Lessing's life and fictional endeavours; and it is close in theme and approach to the novel I have just discussed. Set like the appendix to The Four-Gated City in a barbarous and bleak future, it is perhaps less outward-directed than Mrs. Lessing's other works; for one of its major themes seems to be an attempt at self-exploration. Like Briefing for a Descent into Hell, however, it has many faces, not the least of which is the mystical exploration of the narrator. It shares with that novel, too, a wonderful immediacy and directness, which provide fertile ground for its fantastic elements.

Its narrator is an elderly woman who becomes aware, like others in an unspecified city, that she will soon have to leave, since life there is breaking down.<sup>1</sup> The world outside

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1 Doris Lessing, The Memoirs of a Survivor, p. 11

her small flat is an astonishing combination of absurdly contrasted forces. On the one hand, there are the nomadic tribes of young people, who feast on pieces of waste ground and frequently leave behind a corpse as a reminder of their orgies. On the other, there are the citizens' groups who attempt to regulate sexual practices, or ensure the better treatment of animals.<sup>1</sup> Its contradictions remind one of the war-torn society of Martha Quest's African colony; but its dangers are far more significant.

While the narrator is alert to her surroundings, they gradually become less important to her as her experience of the life "behind the wall" develops. This wall is, in fact, a very mundane part of her flat; and she knows, rationally, there can be no "life" behind it, since it gives on to a corridor.<sup>2,3</sup> Her senses ignore her reason, however; and she breaks through to find a place which holds, "what I needed, knew was there, had been waiting for - oh yes, all my life, all my life."<sup>43</sup>

There are high walls, a series of rooms, an impression of light and air; and in a far room, she catches a glimpse of a man painting. On a second visit, she has a moving intuition

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1    ibid, p. 22

2    ibid, p. 14

3    ibid, p. 15

~~4    ibid, p. 16~~



of the exiled inhabitant of these faded, stained rooms. She is aware of "a sweetness ..... a welcome, a reassurance".<sup>1</sup> This figure (who is female) is familiar to her, as the rooms are themselves; but when she comes to herself once more, she is standing in her living room with her cigarette half burned down.

The life behind the wall now becomes of paramount importance to her; but her exploration of it is complicated by the arrival of Emily. This child is left with the narrator by an unknown man, who states only that she is her "responsibility", despite the fact that she knows nothing at all about her. The novel indicates that Emily is but one casualty of the society it describes; and her "enamelled presence"<sup>2</sup> is a reminder that she is another kind of casualty, too; for she is the victim of an over-strict and conformist upbringing and background. Emily's response to life is an "invincible obedience"<sup>3</sup>; and she settles into her hostess' flat unobtrusively, and with submission, glad of a place of refuge. She has brought with her a peculiar <sup>creature</sup>, Hugo, who is half dog, half cat; and their close relationship throughout the novel is tenderly described.

Emily's arrival is not welcomed by the narrator; for she is now filled with the compulsion that she must clean and

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1    ibid, p. 16

2    ibid, p. 18

3    ibid, p. 24

make ready the rooms behind the wall, just as Charles Watkins had to prepare the square for the arrival of the crystal sphere. She accepts the burden of the child, however; and the novel tellingly narrates the difficult evolution of their relationship, which proceeds from the pattern of the narrator's protection of Emily to the latter's care of the older woman. There is also now a fascinating counterpoint between the experiences of the outer world, as it were, and the world behind the wall, though these frequently reflect upon each other.

These "outer" experiences are much concentrated on the character of Emily, and her growth to womanhood. The narrator watches her develop and regress from child to young woman; she sees her move from periods of adolescent dreaming and puppy fat to the capable and slender young person she eventually becomes. Emily is inevitably drawn to the pavement life of her peers; and the narrator fears she will sometime, like them, disappear, which is also Hugo's foreboding. There are some ominous scenes when Emily tries to take Hugo to the pavement with her; for he is, to a barbarous society, obvious meat. On another occasion, the beast suffers when she deserts him for Gerald, who is finally to become her lover. Emily is much exercised by the conflict between her love for Hugo and her feeling for Gerald; but she manages to reconcile this. With Gerald (who is portrayed as obsessed by a feeling of responsibility) she sets up a commune, where children work and support each other in harmony; but this harmony is disturbed by the arrival of

the animal-like children from underground, who have almost completely reverted to barbarism. Despite their horrific behaviour, Gerald assumes care for them, which drives a wedge between him and Emily, for she thinks they are beyond salvation.

Alongside the narrator's keen apprehension of Emily's development and society's collapse, run her experiences behind the wall. These now take two forms, the personal and the impersonal, the former of which are usually painful and claustrophobic. In these personal scenes, she witnesses aspects of Emily's development, though these are not literally true; since one portrays her as an adult woman clothed in the garb of the 1950's. The horror of these episodes is marked; she experiences the misery of the child Emily in the grip of her large unsatisfied mother, who resembles Mrs. Quest in Martha Quest. She observes the strong aura of sexuality behind Emily's "jolly" relationship with her father. She sees the child's punishment after she has played with excrement;<sup>1</sup> and all these scenes illuminatingly reflect/on the subdued and manipulated child who came to her.

Much more pleasant are the impersonal scenes, where she wanders through rooms, or about the garden of the collapsing house, inescapably aware of the presence of their owner and of a feeling of compulsion.

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1    *ibid*, p. 129



"I was being taken, was being led .... was held always in the hollow of a great hand which enclosed my life, and used me for purposes I was too much beetle or earthworm to understand."<sup>1</sup>

On one occasion, she cleans a room, only to find it desecrated when she returns subsequently. Never, however, does she encounter the owner.

It is at the very close of the novel that the inner and outer worlds fuse. Gerald and Emily's commune has been destroyed; they and the narrator await incipient attacks from the animal-like children. The narrator senses that what she has always been waiting for is at hand; and the walls dissolve to grant a glimpse of the shadowy person she seeks, though all that can be said of her is "nothing at all".<sup>2</sup> She does not enter this other "order of world"<sup>3</sup> alone, however; for a transmuted Emily and a splendid Hugo come with her, while Gerald, in a fearful conflict, lingers for "his children". Eventually, they, too, come running as "the last walls dissolved".

The Memoirs of a Survivor is a suggestive and delicate work which sets up reverberations in the reader's mind. Its narrator's search for the visionary woman reminds one of its author's honourable endeavours to transform human life, and of

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1    ibid, p. 91

2    ibid, p. 190

3    ibid, p. 190

her insistence that we can be more than we are. Emily's experience echoes, at times, that of Martha in Martha Quest; while her suffering, as a baby and young child, seems like an attempt to develop earlier aspects of Martha's character. The link between these two characters and Mrs. Lessing's own life is apparent. On the other hand, the narrator's acceptance of the child, Emily, and the description of the evolution of their relationships imply the evolving and gradual relationship of mother and child; for that is indeed a responsibility and trust which cannot be evaded. All these facets (along with the narrator's mystical vision) lead one to see this novel as a kind of fictional testament, which witnesses to Doris Lessing's life and views. Her effort in it is towards the fullest possible acceptance of her life and experience, painful and otherwise; and here, as elsewhere, one is moved by that effort and its achievement.

CONCLUSION

Doris Lessing is a morally directed artist, whose continual endeavour is to save man from himself. Over the large span of her fiction, she has seen his predicament as tense and terrifying; for he is to her both the victim of his own imperfectly realized nature and larger forces which exert an inexorable dominion. Her response to this situation is clear-sighted but compassionate; and whether through her early rational views or later Sufi beliefs, she urges that the point at which we should start working for regeneration is here, for help may then come, by grace, from afar.

Moral values were vital to her early conception of man and the world; but those values were not dependent on abstractions, nor were they those of society. Characters like Martha Quest reveal that what her creator was often attempting to do was to free moral values from their habitual frames. She was trying to encourage the individual to make up his own mind in the face of the rigours of contemporary life; and to judge each situation, or character, on its own merits. This attempt can be aligned with Iris Murdoch's effort to "free" notions like grace for a wider use, though, of course, Doris Lessing's approach is much more practical and immediate. In the case of both authors, their own values are implicit in their endeavours; and to Iris Murdoch's liberal ethics can be compared Mrs. Lessing's early faith in compassion, charity and love.



She has, however, developed more radically than Iris Murdoch; and her commitment to Sufism releases her to a point of view where reasoned approaches to life are seen to have much less efficacy. The mystical and para-normal are now important; and moral values, as it were, tend to wither away. Her over-riding concern for the development of the whole human race, and her insight that man is a part of a much greater totality, encourage her to feel that the personal and its acts of conscience are less important. The way forward may lie in making the mind quiet and submitting to a current from elsewhere.

Such beliefs are not uncommon in contemporary life; and in the hands of some practitioners, they can become worryingly vague. Mrs. Lessing, however, roots them in a strong grasp of actuality, and an impressive faith in man's potential. Just as her first novel The Grass is Singing powerfully indicates the limitations of man locked off from the "dark gods", so her later works encourage the reader to look at the potential of the extraordinary experience; for in both cases, he is won over by her reference to the world he knows. Central to her and her fiction is the metaphor of balance; and in asserting her belief in man's neglected powers, she tries to tip back the scales of existence. One feels that we ignore her, and others like her, at our cost.

CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to examine the treatment of moral values in the work of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing. Initially, it did so by comparison with the practice of some previous novelists; and suggested some ways in which fiction has habitually treated moral values, and some possible stances which the novelist might adopt in the process.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this comparison was not so much evaluative as exploratory; for I hoped to see by this means whether common ground exists between the treatment of moral values of the four novelists under discussion and the treatment of previous novelists.

There is, I think, a considerable degree of overlap, both in the fictional methods adopted in the treatment of moral values, and in the writers' stances to them. In the course of the thesis, I have made a number of comparisons which will, I hope, have elucidated these shared emphases and modes. For example, Iris Murdoch's painstaking examination of relationships in novels like The Sacred and Profane Love Machine is reminiscent of George Eliot; for both writers are concerned to give the moral life the fullest priority; and they attend to the nuance of choice and motivation with scrupulous interest. They do so, too, in this instance by means of the love story.

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1 see pp. 10 - 15



There has also been a comparison made between Doris Lessing's early criticisms of society and those of Dickens, though it is important to note that her approach is less explicit than his.<sup>1</sup> I have remarked, too, on the similarities between the Martha Quest sequence of novels and George Eliot's Middlemarch, where both writers use their young heroines, to a degree, to test out aspects of their own societies.<sup>2</sup> Muriel Spark's satire in novels like The Public Image is also based on a traditional view of art, values and morality, even if her own positives, as it were, are largely external to her work.

In all these cases, and in many others which have been examined, the writer appears still to perform the function of demonstrating and dramatizing moral issues in ways which are both familiar and valuable. I should like to turn now, however, to consider some aspects of the treatment of moral values which arise particularly from this thesis, and which seem to me both fascinating and significant.

The thesis has revealed that none of the four novelists under discussion reinforces traditional or conventional values in their fiction, so as to perform the function of a mentor. Chapter One suggested that the current state of society might be partially responsible for this;<sup>3</sup> but the view of man and the world which emerges from the work of each writer renders it impossible that they should undertake such a task. Graham

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1 see p. 430

2 see pp. 444 - 446

3 see pp. 46 - 49

Greene portrays a world in which moral issues are seldom clear-cut. He discloses that the simple-minded adherence to the letter of the law can be dangerous; and that the morally correct may not be the good. Conventional values thus frequently become deeply suspect for him, as does any attempt at imposing a particular view or code. Muriel Spark continually urges that it is not man's rôle to judge, but God's; and while many of her values are traditional, her view of fiction precludes her from adopting the rôle of a mentor. Fiction for her has only a tangential connection with Truth; so that to undertake to influence the reader unduly in such an important area would be irresponsible. Nor does either author wish to promulgate Catholic views by means of their fiction; for they are frequently sceptical of institutionalized religion, and see that the individual has sometimes to pursue faith in spite of the Church. Iris Murdoch's fiction is endlessly preoccupied with the moral; but her view of the moral life entails that the individual must struggle with the process of being moral and arriving at his own values by himself. She envisages many ways to the good; the individual must search out that which is most appropriate for him. A prescriptive morality is undesirable; and, moreover, she is deeply suspicious of those who guide others; for their motives are often doubtful; and the results of such interference, as her novels continually disclose, are frequently deadly. Doris Lessing, too, insists that individuals have to make up their own minds on issues. The Martha Quest sequence of novels demonstrates the need for the individ-



ual to exercise his own conscience in the trials of daily life; for there are no absolute standards to be relied on. To reinforce values in a dogmatic way would thus move directly against her own ethics.

All four novelists in fact share a common accent on the individual as the source of value; and convey in their fiction a very real sense of the muddle of human affairs, where to act as an unqualified mentor would be inconsistent. Whether through images like the confused band of guerrillas in The Honorary Consul, the quarrelling priests in The Mandelbaum Gate, the perplexities of the eternal triangle in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, or the dissensions of political factions in Landlocked, they portray man and society as divided and fragmented. His motivation is mixed (as in Martha Quest); his grasp of reality weak (as in Michael Meade); his unthinking dependence on a code (as with Ida in Brighton Rock, or James in The Bell) can be disastrous. Consequently they reveal that moral issues are complex and do not admit of easy solutions. None of them has a simple faith in the reason and the will as agents of moral regeneration; for man's nature and the data of existence are largely inimical to such forces, while Iris Murdoch develops this notion by suggesting that to will good in the face of insuperable odds may occasion death and suffering.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> see for example, her portrait of Hannah in The Unicorn, p. 345



They reject, therefore, the position of the writer as the custodian of shared values; for they see that the individual, in the face of the pressure of the mass and the disparate, must make up his own mind. Graham Greene, Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch would, I think, share Doris Lessing's view that art must not stand aside for life; it must enact and forge its own values, which relate to those of its society, but which are not a simple-minded reflection of society's views.<sup>1</sup> This response is clearly a highly responsible one; and betrays, as I have implied, a sensitive perception of the type of art which the contemporary reader requires in this time of acute social and global change. Just as Richardson and Dickens, in different ways, intelligently served the needs of their public by, in the case of the former, providing a sort of pragmatic Bible of conduct,<sup>2</sup> and, in the case of the latter, strengthening domestic and familial ties,<sup>3</sup> so these four contemporary novelists refuse the dangerous and potentially misleading function of guidance in favour of alerting the reader to the hugeness of the problems which face him and the unlikely efficacy of quick or simple-minded solutions. While this may have the appearance of being a negative response, it is not, surely, so in fact. Indeed, it effectively clears away many of the reader's misconceptions and illusions; and reminds him that he has to think for himself.

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1 Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", pp. 20 - 22

2 see pp. 22 - 24

3 see pp. 24 - 26

I suggested in Chapter One, however, that where the novelist treats moral values critically, he displays a didactic impulse, which is the reverse of the coin of the novelist as mentor.<sup>1</sup> Both Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark perform this function, and thus attempt, in some way, to influence the reader, which might appear to invalidate some of the observations which have just been made. Their approach, though, is instructive; and conforms to the refusal of the novelist to guide the reader dogmatically. In both cases, their criticism is implicit, and depends on concrete demonstration; so that the reader is not told what to think but persuaded, once more, to think. Neither supplies a ready-made answer to the problems they expose, nor can they be accused of a simplistic and limiting didacticism.

To this quizzical stance to the <sup>^</sup>role of the novelist, can be compared Iris Murdoch's and Doris Lessing's overall speculative approach to values in their fiction. They are by no means the first novelists to use their fiction to test moral values, or schemes; but the degree to which they do this seems to me to be fairly radical and innovatory. It is also ambitious and exciting. Iris Murdoch tests out many of her philosophical hypotheses within her novels, as I have argued; and her general effort is towards the rehabilitation of many Christian concepts, such as love and grace. Doris Lessing, on the other hand, works to question the adequacy of society's

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1 see pp. 26 - 27



normative judgements. She eventually proposes a concrete and flexible ethic of feeling in the place of the dead absolute. Neither of these approaches is particularly easy; and both have significant repercussions for the fictional forms which embody them, as I shall attempt to show. Both novelists, however, in these remarkable efforts are not just carrying out what might be termed literature's perennial attempt to show the gap between ideal and man. They are, in addition, in the case of Iris Murdoch, trying to free religious values and states for a fuller, richer use, while Doris Lessing endeavours to reduce the likelihood of man being truncated by the mindless use of absolute standards. The reader's debt to them is thus considerable.

I should like to turn now to consider the implications behind some of the techniques which the thesis has uncovered. When dealing with Doris Lessing's approach to fiction in Chapter Five, I commented that a relationship appeared to exist between the evolution of her religious viewpoint and her experimentation with fictional forms.<sup>1</sup> Just as her starting point was a pragmatic belief in moral values, so the form in which it was enshrined was that of realistic fiction; and she moves to a more indirect and allusive form as she moves to Sufism. Other aspects of this thesis corroborate, I believe, this significant relationship between the form of a work and its author's treatment of moral values, though I do not argue

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1 see pp. 396 - 397



that this is the only, or even the vital constituent in determining the form of a novel.

Thus, the open-ended or indirect forms of many of the novels which have been discussed is partially dependent upon their author's speculative or open view of moral values. In the case of Iris Murdoch, for example, the discussion of The Sandcastle implies that the reader is involved in what was termed the judgmental process;<sup>1</sup> he attempts to come to terms with Mor's predicament as it unfolds; and the author refrains from direct commentary, because she wishes to speculate, not solve. Iris Murdoch's work thus excitingly mimics the slow and gradual moral growth she envisages elsewhere;<sup>2</sup> and in a novel like The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, she is even able, by means of her dénouement, to make the reader turn back to the beginning and examine it afresh. As life reshuffles experience and ensures a fresh appraisal, so the novel forces an adjustment of viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> In the Martha Quest sequence, too, Martha is portrayed as evolving her own ethic of feeling; and reading these novels entails a parallel search on the part of the reader; for authorial comment is rare, and the reader's conscience, like Martha's, is much exercised. Even Graham Greene's modified parables avoid the certainty of the parable form; for they frequently, as in the case of The Power and the Glory, end openly so as to provoke the reader's thought. This

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1 see p. 302

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 37

3 see p. 330

open-endedness clearly contrasts sharply with the frequently conclusive endings of Victorian or eighteenth century fiction, where the author's increased certainty over values allows him, as it were, to make a full and final statement. For Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing such definition is, rightly, impossible.

But the open-ended form of many of the novels under discussion is not the only technical aspect which is of interest. Many of them are ambitious attempts to exploit particular modes; for example, the Gothic convention in Not to Disturb and The Unicorn, "inner space" fiction, in Briefing for a Descent into Hell, the novel of adventure in the work of Graham Greene. Some of these experiments are, of course, indicative of their author's creative vigour or interests; but I think they also bear on what one might term the perennial problem of persuading one's public. This is surely an acutely pressing dilemma for the contemporary novelist, who cannot rely on a shared viewpoint or approach, but who has, as it were, to capture his audience afresh with each new work. In Chapter One, I argued that George Eliot already saw a widening gap between writer and reader; and she adopted within her fiction, several brilliant expedients to circumvent this, and to establish herself as a fit commentator on life.<sup>1</sup> Comparably, Graham Greene may exploit his reader's love of adventure for serious ends; or the snare of sex or mystery may pull him into the work for far-reaching

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1 see pp. 47 - 48



purposes. Iris Murdoch has latterly concentrated on the love story to achieve her deep aims; and while the murders and maimings which occur from time to time in her work are indicative of her love for the bizarre, they may also attract and fascinate the reader. Muriel Spark, too, turns a detached eye on the cavortings of the rich, knowing full well that many of her public are as drawn to their depravities as she is. Doris Lessing exploits the popular genre of space fiction to convey a religious view. By their creative resource, all four novelists in fact display a perceptive awareness of the challenge implicit in treating moral values in fiction, when, to many, such values do not exist, or exist only to be attacked.

The reader, too, is challenged both by these innovatory and often open-ended forms and by the questioning stance to values which they embody. In each chapter on the individual novelists under discussion, I have commented that aspects of their work are not straightforward. For example, Muriel Spark's formal "conceits" have to be carefully unpacked to reveal their significance; in Iris Murdoch's work, the reader has to balance a variety of views of a character to arrive at his own judgement; and the philosophical notions on which these works rest are not easy. In the case of Doris Lessing, he has to achieve some sort of overall view of a massive work like The Children of Violence, or elucidate the beautiful indirections of Briefing for a Descent into Hell. With Graham Greene, there is an individually slanted religious view to be



pondered upon. In each case, he is awakened to the difficult nature of the moral life; and becomes aware that moral issues cannot be pre-determined or simplistically judged. Indeed, frequently, he may see moral issues where before he had no concept that they existed, so that his grasp of the potential of the moral is enlarged.

This enlarging of the sensibility of the reader has, of course, been an honourable and traditional function of fiction;<sup>1</sup> and it is encouraging to see that Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing continue in different and innovatory ways to carry it out. They all, in their fiction, provide what Iris Murdoch has termed "cases" of morals;<sup>2</sup> and just as the reader sees that morality is not the automatic exercise of abstract rules, their refusal to judge lightly encourages his sympathy for others. Muriel Spark, perhaps, does not habitually extend the sympathies of her reader (which George Eliot believed was the foundation of the moral life); but Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing engender a very acute realization of the need for tolerance. Their fiction thus mediates the absolute claims of morality for temporal beings; for it looks at what men do, not what they might be presumed to do, or ought to do, which, I have suggested, is literature's consistent approach. Their fiction teaches no dogma, but helps to refine the sensibility

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1 see W. J. Harvey, Character and the Novel, 1965, p. 14

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", p. 41

of its readers who, in the process of reading (where intuition and feeling, in an interplay with reason, are so vital) are in touch with the moral life.

It can also be argued that their treatment of moral values is as beneficial to them as artists as it can be to their public. All four writers allow the moral to intersect meaningfully with their work; and it is often a fertile source for them. Iris Murdoch's examination of the moral meshes fruitfully with her creative and imaginative insights; and is absolutely central to her fiction. Doris Lessing, too, in her early work and in the Martha Quest sequence finds her treatment of moral values a powerful stimulus to creation. Her handling of the moral grants Muriel Spark a valuable access to the serious, without which her work would become shrill display; while in Graham Greene, the tension between his treatment of moral values and the spiritual is his hallmark, and provides much of his interest as a writer.

It will by now be apparent that if all four writers see moral values as important, they by no means regard them as final. Graham Greene and Muriel Spark consistently see man as a spiritual being, whose soul is of paramount importance; while Doris Lessing's conversion to Sufism leads her to promote a comparably mystical view of life, with which the ethical may jar.<sup>1</sup> Even Iris Murdoch who passionately believes that values

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<sup>1</sup> see p. 497

are a means for us of coming to grips with reality, and that the pursuit of perfection is vital, envisages man as a potentially spiritual being. Moral values emerge, fascinatingly, in each case, as a possible means to a higher self which may, ultimately, do away with the need for them.

This is, I think, a surprisingly traditional viewpoint, though I have stressed each writer's sense that such a process is almost out of fallen man's reach. They are not optimistic about man or the world. Doris Lessing's apprehension of doom is echoed by Graham Greene's portrayal of incessant human war and struggle, while Iris Murdoch warningly patterns the figure of the refugee and the survivor of Belsen into many of her novels; and Muriel Spark sites the Eichmann trial at the heart of The Mandelbaum Gate. They do, however, continue to attend to man and to write fiction, which is indicative of interest, if not optimism.

In times when the individual appears to be increasingly vulnerable, their assertion of what it is like to be human and aspire to the good is valuable. It links them, perhaps surprisingly, with a strong current of English fiction; and their fresh and different approach to the problems of treating moral values today reminds one of T. S. Eliot's comment that art never improves, "but that the material of art is never quite the same".<sup>1</sup> Their work also frequently confirms the reader's

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1 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, English Critical Texts, 1970, p. 295



own sense of the vitality and excellence of the novel in the treatment of moral values, while their constant attempts to, as it were, bring those values up to date reminds one that art gives life to life.

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<u>Five</u>	"	1953
<u>A Proper Marriage</u>	"	1954
<u>Retreat to Innocence</u>	"	1956

<u>The Habit of Loving</u>	(MacGibbon and Kee)	1957
<u>A Ripple from the Storm</u>	(Michael Joseph)	1958
<u>The Golden Notebook</u>	"	1962
<u>A Man and Two Women</u>	(MacGibbon and Kee)	1963
<u>African Stories</u>	(Michael Joseph)	1964
<u>Landlocked</u>	(MacGibbon and Kee)	1965
<u>The Four-Gated City</u>	"	1969
<u>Briefing for a Descent into Hell</u>	(Jon. Cape)	1971
<u>The Summer Before the Dark</u>	"	1973
<u>The Memoirs of a Survivor</u>	(Octagon Press)	1974

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(MacGibbon and Kee) 1957.

<u>In Pursuit of the English</u>	(MacGibbon and Kee)	1960
<u>Particularly Cats</u>	(Michael Joseph)	1967.
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#### Novels

<u>Under the Net</u>	(Chatto and Windus)	1954
<u>The Flight from the Enchanter</u>	"	1956
<u>The Sandcastle</u>		1957
<u>The Bell</u>	"	1958
<u>A Severed Head</u>	"	1961

<u>An Unofficial Rose</u>	(Chatto and Windus)	1962
<u>The Unicorn</u>	"	1963
<u>The Italian Girl</u>	"	1964
<u>The Red and the Green</u>	"	1965
<u>The Time of the Angels</u>	"	1966
<u>The Nice and the Good</u>	"	1968
<u>Bruno's Dream</u>	"	1969
<u>A Fairly Honourable Defeat</u>	"	1970
<u>An Accidental Man</u>	"	1971
<u>The Black Prince</u>	"	1973
<u>The Sacred and Profane Love Machine</u>	"	1974
<u>A Word Child</u>	"	1975
<u>Henry and Cato</u>	"	1976

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"The Idea of Perfection", The Yale Review, March, 1964, vol. 53, pp. 342 - 380.

The Sovereignty of Good (Routledge and Kegan Paul) 1970



iv) MURIEL SPARKNovels and Short Stories

<u>The Comforters</u>	(Macmillan)	1957
<u>Robinson</u>	"	1958
<u>The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories</u>	"	1958
<u>Memento Mori</u>	"	1959
<u>The Ballad of Peckham Rye</u>	"	1960
<u>The Bachelors</u>	"	1960
<u>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</u>	"	1961
<u>The Girls of Slender Means</u>	"	1963
<u>The Mandelbaum Gate</u>	"	1965
<u>Collected Stories (i)</u>	"	1967
<u>The Public Image</u>	"	1968
<u>The Driver's Seat</u>	"	1970
<u>Not to Disturb</u>	"	1971
<u>The Hothouse by the East River</u>	"	1973
<u>The Abbess of Crewe</u>	"	1974
<u>The Takeover</u>	"	1976

Plays

<u>Voices at Play</u>	(Macmillan)	1961
<u>Doctors of Philosophy</u>	"	1963

Miscellaneous

<u>John Masefield</u>	(Peter Nevill)	1953
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